

9132

CONTENTS

CHAP.	PAGE
INTRODUCTION - - -	5
I. THE IRVING PERIOD - - -	8
II. BENSON AND THE BENSONIANS - - -	22
III. THE OLD METHODS - - - - -	40
IV. THE RETURN TO SHAKESPEARE - - -	56
V. THE OLD VIC - - - - -	61
VI. STRATFORD-ON-AVON - - - - -	90
VII. ECCENTRICITIES - - - - -	107
VIII. SHAKESPEARE IN THE OPEN AIR - - -	131
IX. THE PAST AND THE FUTURE - - -	145

FIFTY YEARS OF SHAKESPEAREAN PLAYGOING

INTRODUCTION

IN January, 1890, being in my sixteenth year, I first saw a play of Shakespeare's on the stage. Since then I have seen the whole thirty-seven acted, and a total of more than four hundred performances. My recollections of these, aided by a journal of my impressions, written while they were still fresh, would supply material for a large volume. In this small book I have attempted to give a general sketch rather than a formal narrative. Yet it is not offered merely as a collection of disjointed reminiscences. Though I have frequently deserted chronological order for the convenience of grouping together productions of the same kind or the performances of an individual, I have nevertheless endeavoured to follow a connected plan. My purpose is to strike a mean between the complete history and the personal record; to trace the remarkable changes that have taken place in the methods of producing and acting Shakespeare in the last fifty years, and to illustrate them from the performances I have myself seen.

Another reason why the book cannot pretend to be a full history of this subject is that it is based entirely on the recollections of an amateur playgoer in which there must necessarily be a good many gaps. Yet if it lacks completeness it may perhaps gain something through being a first-hand record of personal impressions. In reading of the great performers of the past it does not help us much to be told that Edmund Kean was magnificent as Othello or Mrs. Siddons terrifying as Lady Macbeth. We could guess that for ourselves. But when some one who saw them tells us as precisely and vividly as he can how they spoke certain lines or did certain things I for one am sincerely grateful. So if any one complains that some of the things I have recorded are mere trivialities I reply that I have written for those who are like-minded with myself in this matter.

For the same reason I have assumed in the reader a fairly good knowledge of the plays. For example, when I speak of the nunnery scene in *Hamlet* or the letter scene in *Twelfth Night* I take for granted that the reader will know what I am talking about, and will not require me to expand these titles into 'the scene in which Hamlet tells Ophelia to go to a nunnery,' or 'in which Malvolio read the supposed letter from Olivia.'

This has the additional advantage of making for brevity, as also has my custom of sometimes referring to the plays by such shortened titles as the *Merchant* and the *Dream* for *The Merchant of Venice* and *A Midsummer Night's Dream*. Similarly

I consistently write IV. ii for Act IV, Scene ii, and so on.

Perhaps I should add that my acquaintance with the theatre, Shakespearean or other, is that of a spectator only. The occasions on which I have met a professional actor or actress in private life could be numbered on the fingers of one hand, and I have only once talked with a dramatic critic. With this limitation I have found in the drama, and especially the Elizabethan drama, one of the main interests of my life.

In my younger days I was always ready to listen eagerly to those who could tell me, from their own observation, about the acting of the great players of a bygone time. And more recently I have found in some at any rate of my juniors the same willingness to listen to my garrulous ramblings about performances that lie beyond the horizon of their memory. And I have been surprised to realize how recent that horizon is. Not only the story of the theatre before what is to my generation the Great Divide of August, 1914, but such comparatively modern periods as that of Mr. Atkins at the Old Vic, have for many playgoers of to-day passed into the region of history. Therefore I have written this book, primarily for my own amusement and as a relief from fairly strenuous daily work, but also in the hope that it may give pleasure to those who share my interest in its subject, and possibly that it may prove to be not altogether without value as a record in the future.

CHAPTER I

THE IRVING PERIOD

TOWARDS the end of the last century Shakespearean acting was dominated by Henry Irving at the Lyceum, and I must begin with him although he was not the first actor I saw in Shakespeare.

My first sight of him was as King Lear. And it is a thrilling experience to recall, even after forty - seven years. Kent and the others have spoken their opening dialogue ending with 'the king is coming.' And here he comes down the steps, a striking figure with masses of white hair. He is leaning on a huge scabbarded sword which he raises with a wild cry in answer to the shouted greetings of his guards. His gait, his looks, his gestures, all reveal the noble, imperious mind already degenerating into senile irritability and ready to fall into utter ruin under the coming shocks of grief and rage.

He brought out the human side of Lear and therefore the pity of his story more fully than any actor I have seen ; for example, in his affection for Cordelia, and later his pathetic reluctance to believe the worst of her sisters until belief was forced upon him. (By the way, he knelt to deliver the

curse ; most actors, I think, remain standing.) One of his very best scenes was that in Act IV, in which he entered crowned with flowers, his madness having taken a quieter, more fantastic turn. Here his banter of Gloster was infinitely pathetic, and so was the madman's cunning with which he eluded Cordelia's emissaries, leading up to what was to me the most heart-rending moment of the play, the shambling run of his exit at 'you shall get it by running.' This moved me even more than the scene of his recognition of Cordelia, beautiful as that was.

Modern playgoers would say that his last scene was too long drawn out, as he sat on the ground by Cordelia's body, playing with the rope round her neck, then sinking down beside her, and at the last raising his head again and again in the hope of finding in her some sign of life. Later on I shall have something to say in praise of the brisker methods of to-day. For the moment it is sufficient to reply that these critics have not seen Henry Irving.

During the last thirteen years of his life I saw him as often as I could, and added Mathias, Becket, Mephistopheles, and others, about twenty in all, to my store of memories. Here I confine myself to Shakespeare. There were those who said there was too little variety in his acting. It is true he was 'always Irving' in the sense that his strong personality could be seen in every character. But this detracts nothing from his greatness as an artist. Such critics might profitably have com-

pared his lightness of touch and fantastic drollery as Benedick with the impish humour of his Richard. No villain can ever have so thoroughly enjoyed the fun of his own villainy. Remember, as Dr. Forman would say, how at the entrance of Anne he withdrew into an angle of the street and listened with mischievous enjoyment to her lament over King Henry's body. I have never seen any one who could express this kind of humour as he could. In the next scene, while the others are wrangling and squabbling he is again quietly enjoying the fun, and then he sits down calmly to write out the warrant which will put Clarence in the power of the Murderers. The scene in which he refuses and at last accepts the crown was another piece of grim comedy. At the climax of it he hid his face behind his prayer-book, and under cover of it shot at Buckingham a wink of unspeakably crafty triumph.

A significant contrast this to Benson's action at the same point, when he hurled his prayer-book into the air with a shout of 'King!'. Significant because it illustrates the difference between the styles of two great actors. Benson as Richard was fierce, loud, energetic; Irving was quiet, malicious, and sardonic.

Irving's Iachimo was most interesting as an intellectual study, cold and inhuman, yet sensual, and in his remorse strangely pathetic. Coriolanus, the

¹ More recently I have seen an actor at the end of this scene reel and stamp about the stage in fits of hysterical laughter. And this, too, was not amiss.

last Shakespearean part in which I saw him, was also the least successful. A single man can overcome a mob by personal magnetism, in which Irving was never deficient; and in the scenes with the crowd and the tribunes his irony was superb. But intellectual force will not enable one man to defeat an army in hand-to-hand fighting as Coriolanus does.

His Shylock I can best describe as an elaborate study in the grand manner. A stately, patriarchal figure, he could yet unbend in grim humour or cringe before the Christians in an obeisance charged with sinister mockery. As Antonio and Bassanio leave the stage at the end of the first Act he walks slowly in the opposite direction till they are out of sight, then turns and, raising his staff in a threatening gesture, sends after them a look of concentrated hatred. In Act III the furious intensity of 'Hath not a Jew eyes?' was contrasted with the despairing calm of 'no satisfaction, no revenge.' In the trial scene when at last he realizes his defeat he stands as if turned to stone. Dazed and almost unconscious he assents mechanically to whatever is said to him. Only when the conditions of his pardon are to be stated does he turn a haggard look on the speaker, anxious to hear what further humiliation is in store; and at last he totters out a broken man, only gathering himself together for one steady look of scorn at the mocking Gratiano.

All this was, as I have said, elaborate, carefully thought out and as carefully built up in practice,

and it took more time than would suit with modern methods of playing the part. But it was really great acting, the work of a powerful and original mind applying long and devoted study to Shakespeare's plays, and working out its conceptions with imagination, technical skill, and genius. Nor must I omit a reference to the famous mannerisms which were a godsend to the critic and the parodist, as Mr. Gladstone's collars or Joseph Chamberlain's eyeglass were to the caricaturist. Irving's peculiarities of voice and gait were a part of himself, and no more affected the greatness of his work than the collars or the eyeglass detract from the achievements of the statesmen.

One of the failings against which Mr. Agate has warned the aged is arguing with the young on the question whether Irving was a great actor. I never do; I tell them. But the complete and final answer to those who talk of the 'Irving myth' and *laudatores temporis acti* is the undeniable fact that he not only won the hero-worship of us youngsters, but also roused the enthusiasm of our more experienced elders, including many of the master-spirits of the age, and even compelled such cool and aloof anti-romantics as the reluctant Archer to a belated, and the hostile Shaw to a grudging, admiration, and J. T. Grein, the avowed champion of Ibsen, to admiration unalloyed.

Even my own enthusiasm did not blind me to his shortcomings. His Coriolanus, as I have said, was far from an unqualified success. And his Benedick, charming as parts of it were, was marred

by undignified clowning. He allowed the eaves-dropping scene to be cluttered up with traditional and foolish business; and, against Miss Terry's better judgement, as she revealed in her autobiography, he retained the ridiculous old gag at the end of the church scene.

Of his partner in greatness who survived him for a quarter of a century much has been written lately, and I do not feel inclined to add to it. But to leave her out altogether is almost as impossible as to say anything adequate. Two characters of hers I chiefly loved, Portia and Beatrice. Even to-day no actress has a fair chance with me in these parts because Ellen Terry's voice and gestures keep coming between me and her.¹ What need to pile up nouns and adjectives? Others have had gaiety and humour, grace and vivacity, tenderness, dignity, and deep feeling, but not as Ellen Terry had them. For an almost trivial example, how she flashed out 'No: an he were I would burn my study,' in the first scene of *Much Ado*. And then her chaff of Benedick, her delivery of the last speech in the arbour scene, 'What fire is in mine ears?' And the whirl of passion in the church scene!

It has been said that Irving's Shylock spoiled her Portia in the Trial Scene, and it is certain that we scarcely had eyes or ears for any one but him just then. Fortunately I saw her play it with another Shylock years later and could enjoy to the

¹ Only Miss Sybil Thorndike as Portia, I think, has completely overcome this handicap.

full the way she dominated it. And at the Lyceum she had other scenes in which she could confront Morocco with a dignity equal to his own, move all hearts with the beauty of her great scene with Bassanio, and delight us by the gaiety with which she threw herself into the business of the rings. No chance, then, of the last Act seeming an anticlimax, even after Irving in the Trial.

Of her Cordelia I wrote in 1893, 'most touching in its beautiful simplicity,' and I have nothing to add except that I can still see her most beautifully melting into tears in the reconciliation scene. Nor can I say much of Imogen or of Volumnia, a part in which her deep waters ran very still. Beautiful no doubt they were, but for me, among her Lyceum parts, Portia and Beatrice remain supreme.

In later years we had the great happiness of seeing her in three new Shakespearean parts. Never, in my experience, did she let herself go with such bubbling humour as when she played Mistress Page. And her own enjoyment of the fun of it all made us enjoy it as much as she did herself, while Mrs. Kendal's graver, more subdued humour as Mistress Ford supplied the right contrast. It was a real inspiration in Mr. Tree (not yet Sir Herbert) to choose these two actresses for his *Merry Wives* in 1902. Fifteen years later, when she was nearly seventy, she acted some scenes from this play at the Coliseum, and I could detect no falling off in her delicious humour. While she was taking her calls on this occasion a Canadian soldier next me asked, 'Who is that artist?' And

when I told him her name he appeared never to have heard it, merely remarking, 'She seems to be popular.'

To Mr. Tree also we owed it that in 1905 we saw the grace and sweetness of her Hermione, some half a century after she first appeared in *Winter's Tale* as Mamilius. Last of all of her Shakespearean parts was Juliet's Nurse in 1919. As might be expected she was not a Mrs. Gamp. It was not in her to be 'earthy as a potato,' as was said of Miss Evans's wonderful performance. But what a joy to see her again, and in Shakespeare, and to hear her delivery of the Nurse's first long speech! The bit about Susan brought tears to my eyes, she spoke it so beautifully. I may have 'weak lachrymal glands,' as Mr. Gielgud says the Terry family themselves have, but Juliet's Nurse never made me cry before or since.

It has been alleged that Irving failed to allow his colleagues a fair share of prominence. Doubtless, like Malvolio, he knew his place as he would they should know theirs. He was well aware that we came to see him and Miss Terry, and he took care that we should not be disappointed. But he knew his business well enough to understand that 'stars' do not lose but gain by efficient support. Probably there were weak spots in this Company as in others. But speaking generally Irving took care that the two chief performers should be surrounded by a cast well trained to support them but also capable of good acting on their own account. There was the splendid Queen Mar-

garet of that fine actress with the magnificent voice, Genevieve Ward ; and the beautiful acting of Mr. Haviland as Lear's Fool. His 'And I'll go to bed at noon,' spoken as he sunk wearily on the floor by the side of Lear's couch remains one of the most moving things I have ever heard on the stage. And the tribunes in *Coriolanus* played by two first-rate actors, both cut off in early manhood ; Laurence Irving subtly malevolent, James Hearn a robust and choleric demagogue. Nor, speaking of Laurence Irving, have I seen, among many Antonios in the *Merchant*, a better than his. It is easy to make Antonio calm and dignified, less easy to harmonize these qualities, as this actor did, with a sort of mean pride in his own superiority.

And there was the other Antonio (in *Much Ado*) of the veteran Henry Howe whose defiance of Claudio seldom failed to win a round of applause. So, at least, I was told, for I only once heard it myself. Nowadays I might wait a long time before hearing an actor applauded for his delivery of a single speech. I must leave the reader to decide whether this is because actors have forgotten how to speak or because audiences can no longer tell good speaking from bad.

Another example of the care Irving took that small parts as well as big should be well played was the sentry in *Coriolanus* of whom Mr. Belmore gave a capital sketch, as a blunt, hectoring, good-humoured fellow. And, remembering Mr. Gordon Craig as the smiling villain Oswald in *Lear*, and his one scene as Edward IV in *Richard III*,

I have never ceased to regret that he retired so early from the stage.

After the acting the principal attraction at the Lyceum was the beauty of the stage pictures; the church in *Much Ado*, the house of Aufidius in *Coriolanus*, the lovely garden in *Cymbeline*, the wild grandeur of the heath in *Lear*. Nothing was overdone as Tree was prone to overdo it. All was artistic and in keeping with the spirit of each play. I may just add that the battle in *Cymbeline* was the most thrilling and realistic I have ever seen in the theatre.

Small wonder, then, that the Lyceum in Irving's time was a national institution, a home of culture to which there is no modern parallel. By a combination of great acting, good support, and artistic mounting, each in its due proportion, he had made the theatre fashionable, and created his own public among people of education and culture, and indeed among those of all classes who could appreciate good art. And this tradition lasted down to the Great War. That it no longer exists to anything like the same extent is not entirely due to such competitors as the cinema and the wireless. It is because there is no Irving and no Lyceum. Not long ago I had an illustration of the difference in the intellectual standard of theatre-goers then and now, when I ventured to remonstrate with a producer of *Richard II* for allowing his actors to pronounce the name Aumerle as it is written instead of, as it should be, Aumâle, a contraction of Albemarle. His reply was that if he allowed the

proper pronunciation he would receive a hundred letters of protest instead of my one. Yet in Benson's and Tree's productions it was always Aumâle and no one expected it to be anything else.¹

During the last years of Irving's reign at the Lyceum Beerbohm Tree at the Haymarket was rising into the second place as a producer of Shakespeare, but he did not come to his full glory until he opened his magnificent new theatre in 1897, and his achievements there will form the subject of a later chapter. But there is one Shakespearean actor of that time who stands very near in my regard to Irving and Ellen Terry.

Johnston Forbes Robertson of the beautiful voice and presence was a virile Romeo, and his Hamlet the best I have seen, full of charm and grace, a remarkable contrast to Hermann Vezin's bitter, sardonic Prince which I saw about the same time. It was characteristic of Forbes Robertson that his Hamlet roused himself from the lethargy of approaching death to tell Osric in apologetic tones and with a charming smile that he could not live to hear the news from England. A companion touch, so to speak, occurred in his Macbeth when instead of furiously raging at the Messenger he said, 'The devil damn thee black, thou cream-faced loon,' in a tone of bitterest sarcasm. He was not a terrible but a very human, almost a sympathetic, Macbeth. His pitiful, crouching terror

¹ One might suppose that the more pleasant sound of Aumâle would count for something, yet I have even heard the 'Au' of the first syllable pronounced as in August—'Ormerl.'

in the murder scenes was typical. So was his mournful, ironical, self-pity after he has achieved the crown.

His Shylock was a picturesque rather than a great figure; and he acted the part with severe restraint, making his effect by steady force without any attempt at great moments. Thus to some extent he anticipated the more 'natural' method of playing the part which has since become usual.

Best of all, after his Hamlet, was his Othello. His delivery of the great speeches, especially the last, was beautiful beyond compare, and I have seen no actor who could make the true nobility of Othello's soul shine out so convincingly. For, in spite of all he says and does in his agony, nobility should be the abiding impression that Othello leaves on us. Among his other gifts, Forbes Robertson, like Irving, had the power of making the spectator believe that the character he was impersonating was a really great man.

Unlike Irving, he was handicapped by inferior support. The Mercutio of Charles Coghlan was one of the feeblest pieces of acting I have seen on any stage (it is fair to add that he was in failing health), and Mrs. Patrick Campbell, an actress of the first rank outside Shakespeare, was not born to play Juliet or Lady Macbeth. But the splendid vigour of Robert Taber's Macduff made amends for much. I always judge a Macduff largely by his last six lines in the scene with Malcolm in Act IV, and Mr. Taber gave them just the right blend of fire and pathos. His Laertes was almost

as good. A point in it that I have not seen since was that he seemed to be about to refuse to take part in the King's plot against Hamlet until the Queen brought the news of Ophelia's death which finally determined him upon revenge. Another unique feature of this *Hamlet* was that a distinction was made between those unheavenly twins Rosenkrantz and Guildenstern; the former being sympathetic and friendly to Hamlet, the latter sinister and hostile.

But apart from Taber and Forbes Robertson himself my most vivid memory of these revivals is the moment in the first scene of *Romeo* when Tybalt, a splendid figure in flaming red, appeared on a bridge at the back of the stage, yelling his challenge to Benvolio at the top of his voice above the din of the street battle.

One other actor-manager of those times must be mentioned. George Alexander, like Forbes Robertson, had formerly been a member of Irving's Company, but modern comedy was his line, and his two incursions into Shakespearean production, though pleasant, were not striking. Nor were his own very mild Orlando and Benedick, though I can still chuckle at the remembrance of his inane 'Ha, ha!' after the others have left the stage in the arbour scene. And there were good actors in his Company. Fred Terry's Don Pedro was a real piece of vigorous Shakespearean comedy. H. B. Irving's harsh, saturnine Don John was the best I have seen. His grating voice exactly suited the character. And Miss Fay Davis as Celia

and Hero was just right in her demurely mischievous playing up to Rosalind and Beatrice. Finally Miss Julia Neilson was probably the last actress of Rosalind to introduce into the part the Cuckoo Song from *Love's Labour's Lost*.

Sir Walter Scott mentions as 'one of the advantages attending the conclusion of *Woodstock*' that he can now read *Brambletye House*, a contemporary novel on a similar theme, from which he had 'hitherto conscientiously refrained.' In the same spirit I now look forward to enjoying the recent book on Irving entitled *We Saw Him Act*, and comparing the opinions of my betters with my own recollections of the greatest actor it has been my good fortune to see, and the greatest, I believe, that has trod the English stage since Edmund Kean.

CHAPTER II

BENSON AND THE BENSONIANS

WHAT Irving was to London in my early days F. R. Benson was to the provinces. In some respects, indeed, he was more. For more than thirty years, until at the age of fifty-seven he got himself accepted for war service in 1916, he travelled up and down the country keeping alive the knowledge and love of Shakespeare as an acted dramatist. He produced, in all, thirty-five of the plays, a record exceeded in modern times only by the Old Vic which has given the whole thirty-seven. What is more he interpreted them with imagination and intelligence. And, what is most of all, he surrounded himself with probably the most brilliant company of actors that has ever devoted itself to the playing of Shakespeare.

This brilliance I attribute to two factors. First, his own genius—it was nothing less—in training and inspiring them. In the words of the address presented to him at Stratford towards the end of his career, he ‘created more than one generation of actors.’ And, secondly, the repertory system. The Benson Company, unlike some modern actors, seemed thoroughly at home in Shakespeare, and spoke the verse as if it came natural to them.

They showed, in fact, that constant changes of programme and the necessity of playing now big parts, now small, in a rapid alternation of tragedy and comedy, history and farce, can transform a mediocre actor, if he has anything in him at all, into a first-rate one.

Again and again when I have admired the work of an actor unfamiliar to me I have found on looking into his record that he was at one time with Benson. In fact it may be said with not much exaggeration that nearly every good player of the last generation learnt to act under his banner. Henry Ainley, Randle Ayrton, Lily Brayton, Graham Browne, Alfred Brydone, O. B. Clarence, James Dale, Robert Donat, A. E. George, Dorothy Green, H. R. Hignett, Matheson Lang, H. O. Nicholson, Nancy Price, Basil Rathbone, Arthur Whitby, Harcourt Williams, are only a few of the names. I could make the list much longer. But I must pass on to the four who, with Benson himself, gave me the greatest measure of delight.

It is pleasant to remember that the first play of Shakespeare's I saw acted was *Midsummer Night's Dream*, played by the Benson Company in January, 1890. Naturally I can recall but little of it, and I have only a few lines in a boyish diary to help me. Flute was played by Stephen Phillips the poet, a name that meant nothing to me then though I saw some of his plays produced by Tree and Alexander a few years later. But I do know that I was amused by George Weir as Bottom, especially by his dazed reminiscences of his asinine

existence at the end of Act IV. I bracket him and Hay Petrie as incomparably the best Shakespearean clowns of my time. Both had this in common with the original Elizabethan clown, that they were at their best when the author gave them only the outline of a character which they could fill in by abounding in their own sense. I do not mean by speaking more than was set down for them, though Weir perhaps was not always innocent of that. But when he had a full-length character to interpret he seemed to be afraid of it. Falstaff, for instance, is not a clown's part, and as the Falstaff of the *Merry Wives* (I never saw him in *Henry IV*) he was dull and apparently uncomfortable. But when he was simply the funny man of the play, Lancelot Gobbo, Grumio, a servant in *Romeo*, he was gloriously funny, full of ingenious and mostly quite legitimate business; and he had a gorgeously comic voice.

But I should do his memory an injustice if I were to give the impression that his art consisted merely in fooling though he was best at that. There was also the dry, sententious humour of his Gravedigger, his grave pathos as the Gardener in *Richard II*, and the grotesqueness of his First Witch. And he could make the most of a tiny part like the Mayor in *Richard III*, or Pandarus (which he doubled with a very amusing citizen) in *Julius Caesar*.

No Bensonian ever maundered through a part as some modern actors do, but even in that Company Frank Rodney was conspicuous for 'mixing

his colours with brains.' As a graceful and gallant Bassanio or Ferdinand he was what would since be called a 'flapper's hero.' But he pleased me more in parts in which his subtle intelligence had greater scope. His Feste I count the best I have seen because he alone, in my experience,¹ let us see the professional Fool from his own point of view—from within so to speak—not merely as he appeared to those whom it was his business to amuse. One saw, for example, how he pulled himself together at Olivia's approach, as if saying, 'Now I must do my funny stuff.' Very clever, too, was the superficial air of chivalry which he threw over his cold and crafty Bolingbroke in *Richard II*. And to him I owe two of the most thrilling things I have seen on the stage. One was, as Macduff, his rousing of the household after Duncan's murder; the other, when he played Gloucester in 2 *Henry VI*, his fierce quarrel 'aside' with Beaufort in the hunting scene; here the credit was shared with Benson himself as the Cardinal. And I must interpose a word of regret that this play is so seldom acted; as produced by Benson it proved itself extraordinarily picturesque and effective, and full of good acting parts.

Perhaps Ford was the best thing Rodney ever did. He played the jealous husband with terrific intensity, yet gave the very extravagance of his suspicion a comic twist which kept it in the key of farce. By all accounts the acting of the great Robson in tragic burlesque must have been something like that.

¹ I refer only to actors of Feste, not of the Fools in general.

The first time I saw Lyall Swete was as Tranio in the *Shrew* in 1891, and from that moment till his death some thirty-five years later he was one of my favourite actors. As Tranio, and still more as Gratiano in the *Merchant*, and as Mercutio, he had a gay, debonair swagger which yet had a brawny solidity about it that made him the very image of a roystering Elizabethan gallant. His Slender, long, lanky, and fantastically foolish, was a delightful caricature of the same gallant. And with this I may couple his Gremio in a later performance of the *Shrew*, a lackadaisical old man, amorous and conceited. When his hopes are finally shattered he said, 'My cake *is* dough,' in a tone of despairing resignation which is still in my ears.

Another clever bit of work, on quite different lines, was his Suffolk in *Henry VI*, the magnificent noble, proud and luxurious, in striking contrast to Rodney's grave, statesmanlike Duke Humphrey. For in Shakespeare's mind the historical characters of these two seem to have changed places. It is curious to recall that some twenty years later Swete represented a fifteenth-century aristocrat as imagined by a very different playwright in Mr. Shaw's *Saint Joan*.

He ought to have played Falconbridge. Rodney, though intelligent as always, had not the thews and sinews for the part. But I should have been sorry to have missed Swete's King John; a weak, handsome man with a crafty smile, his fawning

smoothness occasionally breaking into paroxysms of Angevin fury.

Lastly, for I must not linger too long even over so fine an actor, he was the best Polonius I have seen. He did not exaggerate the comic aspects of the part, but while bringing out the meanness and weakness of the man showed also how it was possible for him to have attained high office and achieved the reputation of a statesman.

The last of my special favourites to join the Company was Oscar Asche. The first time I specially noticed him he was Duncan, and even in that unexciting part there was a distinction about him that marked him as a man to watch. His best part was the King in *Hamlet*, sensual, savage, and cunning, but with sufficient remains of majesty to assume on occasion the bearing of a king. Dignity, indeed, was one of Asche's strongest suits, as he showed in his superb Prince of Morocco and as Norfolk in *Richard II*. But when he played a tribune in *Coriolanus* you thought you had never seen anything so undignified as this coarse, shambling demagogue with his low cunning and his envious temper. One of his best scenes was that in Act IV when his gloating enjoyment of his popularity was quickly followed by his violent and realistic death at the hands of the fickle mob. This incident, by the way, was a Bensonian addition, for in Shakespeare the tribunes are still alive in the last Act.

Two smaller parts illustrated the wide range of his art: his quaintly comical Biondello in the

Shrew, and his surly Snug in the *Dream*. Here his contemptuous disgust at the whole business of the rehearsal was one of the most amusing features of the clowns' scenes.

After leaving the Benson Company he was for a time with Tree, and again showed his versatility by the senile, bleary, cunning of his Baptista in *Katherine and Petruchio*. This is Garrick's shortened version of the *Shrew*, revived by Tree in 1901. All that need be said of it is that it occupied forty-five minutes which might have been spent more profitably by both actors and audience.

Asche then went into management, and it will be appropriate to say something here about his Shakespearean revivals. For they were clearly an outcome of his experience with Benson. His *Dream* and *Shrew* were obviously modelled on Benson's, though his Petruchio (which he doubled with Sly) was a mere roystering bully, much less subtle than Benson's. His *Othello* and *As You Like It* were experiments in the manner of Tree, splendidly mounted, with much mangling of the text, and such superfluous innovations as bringing on Desdemona as a *muta persona* in each of the first two scenes, thus spoiling the effect of what should be her first appearance in the third. He himself was in some ways the ideal Othello. He had the bulk, the magnificence of demeanour, the tragic air and voice; and he could suggest the barbaric ferocity underlying the calm and stately surface. But he did not fully plumb the depths of the part.

After a long interval in which he went Chu-Chin-Chowing, he returned to Shakespeare in his latest years and in 1932 produced a remarkable *Julius Caesar* at His Majesty's. To see a play of Shakespeare's in that theatre after the lapse of nearly twenty years brought back many memories; especially as the production was very much in the style of Tree with magnificent scenes, large omissions from the text, and ingenious business and effects to illustrate what was left of it; for example, a realistic imitation of pouring rain in I. ii. Much more to the point were the murmuring of distant crowds, and the buzz of talk in the Senate scene before Caesar's entry. This was excellently done, so that one just caught a significant word here and there, and it produced a thrilling sensation of nervous expectancy of something exciting about to happen. And there was Asche himself as Casca, burly and sinister, lounging on a bench, saying nothing but dominating the whole scene, not by managerial tricks but by force of personality.

There was another striking moment after the murder when the conspirators stood motionless as if dazed and awestruck by their own success till the entry of Trebonius restored them to reality and normal life. The effect was that which De Quincey attributes to the knocking on the gate in *Macbeth*.

The last time I saw Asche was as Falstaff, a part he was obviously born to play, though as far as I know he played only the lesser Falstaff of the *Merry Wives*. When he first produced this play

in 1911 he had the not very happy thought of setting it in the depth of winter and covering everything with snow. This gave opportunity for some Christmas card effects in the scenery and a good deal of not very funny business of snow-balling and so on. Nor was his own Falstaff as good as it afterwards became. When I saw it for the fourth and last time in 1933 it had developed into a rich, fruity, and truly humorous performance, the best *Merry Wives* Falstaff I have seen. His constant interruptions of the others with 'What, what, what,' 'Yes, yes, yes,' in the manner of George III, became rather a bore. But his more audacious gags showed that he really understood and enjoyed the part; 'Get thee behind me, Satan,' to Mrs. Quickly, and 'I'll creep into an acorn cup,' when he is trying to hide from the fairies. Actually he made no attempt to lie down—I suppose for the same reason that made Falstaff reluctant to do so on Gadshill. For by that time he was bulky enough to play the part without padding.

This performance is also memorable to me because in it I saw Benson himself for the last time. And so by a devious route I come at length to the great actor and manager who inspired it all. I may as well admit that my youthful eyes were so dazzled by the brilliant performances of the actors I have just described that I was inclined to overlook Benson's own acting, and would quote what Tennyson's King Arthur says about his knights being better men than he, though I always realized

his merits as a trainer and producer. There was this excuse for me that his own acting mellowed and matured in his middle age. In early life he ranted and grimaced too much, and took irritating liberties with the text—some intentional, some unintentional. When Alice in *Henry V* says, *les langues des hommes sont pleins de tromperies*, I have heard him interpolate 'the lungs of men are full of trumperies.' This was probably sheer high spirits. He was revelling in the fun of the scene. Some of his departures from the text were less excusable.

And here I make an end of censure. Loyalty to a fellow-Wykehamist (in my schooldays when he came to the Corn Exchange at Winchester we would troop there to applaud him) and gratitude for the many happy hours he has given me, besides a genuine recognition of his greatness, must make the rest nearly all praise.

He was a distinguished athlete and sometimes let his athleticism appear on the stage; but only where it was appropriate. It added to the realism of his missing-link Caliban that he could clamber nimbly up a tree and hang head downwards from a branch, chattering with rage at Prospero. This feat I saw him perform again at the age of sixty-three. In his earlier years when playing Orlando he would lift Oscar Asche, even then no light weight, and throw him clean over his head. A curiosity of a different kind occurred in the next Act when Asche, none the worse for his fall as Charles, appeared as the Banished Duke and himself spoke the wounded stag speeches. An old

tradition of the theatre which still survived in my young days gave them to Jaques, but this was something new. And, talking of stage traditions, I was surprised to find that as late as 1927 Benson allowed Le Beau the time-dishonoured gag, 'he says he cannot speak.' I did not think to hear it again.

When he played Petruchio Benson's whipcracking, jumping on tables, and horseplay generally were quite in keeping with the spirit of the taming scenes, and he did not let them disguise the fact that he was merely outplaying the Shrew at her own game for the sake of their future happiness. And Mrs. Benson played up to him splendidly. In her first scene she looked magnificent in dark red and carrying a crutch-handled stick with which she laid about her on the slightest provocation. In termagant parts she was unrivalled, as her realistic Doll Tearsheet also showed. She was clever, too, as Queen Margaret in *Henry VI*, impatient with her meek husband and tigerishly amorous over her handsome Suffolk.

If the taming scenes of the *Shrew* became a pantomime rally the duel in *Merry Wives* more nearly resembled a football scrum with Benson's Caius as the most active and prominent of the forwards. Both plays are farces and he took quite legitimate advantage of the fact to play them in a boisterously farcical style. But he did not let them get out of hand. The Bianca story in the *Shrew* and the less violent parts of the *Wives* were given in a style of fantastic comedy that was delightful

in itself and a pleasant contrast to the more violent episodes.

In *Twelfth Night* Sir Toby and the lighter people, as Fabian calls them, played their scenes in brisk, merry style with a certain amount of knockabout business, but not so much as I have known the Old Vic Company allow themselves. Benson's rather angular style was well suited to Malvolio. I do not count this among his very best parts, but like all he did it had distinction and character.

To come to the more serious plays, his Antony in *Julius Caesar* was a vigorous, spirited performance. I recall him in the first Act, dressed in goat-skins 'for the course,' as the stage-direction says, as he ran laughing among the crowd. This was a real bit of character interpretation to which Tree's sombre and elderly Antony could never attain. And he delivered the oration in the Forum with splendid fire which, again, Tree did not. The more mature Antony of *Antony and Cleopatra* did not suit him so well. In fact the whole Company seemed less at home in that play than in any in which I saw them. They took it much too slowly. Asche as the bluff and sturdy Pompey and Weir as the clown were the only members of the long cast who did themselves justice.

Benson was not to blame because in tragedy the pace was often slow and therefore much had to be omitted. That was an old tradition of the theatre, and may, I suppose, be traced back to 'the good old manner of quavering out their tragic

notes' which Colley Cibber learnt from the actors of the Restoration period and taught to their successors. Be that as it may, it must be admitted that Benson and his colleagues sometimes spoke too deliberately, with many pauses and much repetition of words and phrases. And in going off the stage, as some one said, they backed and shunted like a South-Eastern train trying to get into Cannon Street. All this was a survival of a fashion which, as I have tried to show, was not without its advantages. And the Bensonians were capable of swift as well as vigorous speaking when they thought it was required. Reviewing one of their London productions in 1900, Max Beerbohm, I remember, observed, with that 'sprightliness' which was then supposed to be his special prerogative, that 'speech after speech was sent spinning to the boundary.'

From about this time I noticed an improvement in Benson's own tragic acting. His Macbeth became one of the best I have seen, thoughtful, restrained, with hardly a trace of his earlier mannerisms. He showed the self-centred, self-tormenting villain admirably, and was at his best in the last Act, haggard, careworn, and savage in his despair. As Hamlet he lacked the charm of Forbes Robertson, but gave a very thoughtful interpretation, based, as it seemed, on the King's words.

There 's something in his soul
O'er which his melancholy sits on brood.

There would be sudden fits of fierce passion or

sarcasm, and then he would relapse again into a dogged melancholy.

His Shylock was a magnificent example of the 'Major Prophet' manner of playing the character which I should be sorry to see perish from the stage. Towering above all the rest, morally as well as physically, in his intense passion he wrung every ounce of effect out of the part. Needless to say he kept all the old business with the scales and the knife, as well as the return to his deserted house in Act II, which was Irving's invention, and the torn sleeve, symbolical of his oath, which I think was his own. His pouring dust on his head in the scene with Tubal was an effective touch, and so was his contemptuous putting aside of Gratiano at his last exit.

Best of all, perhaps, was his Richard II. Luxuriating as much in his melancholy and self-pity in the later scenes as in his insolent languor in the earlier, he threw an imaginative glamour over the whole such as I have never known in that character and seldom in any. And by his irony in the deposition scene he made Bolingbroke look extremely foolish, and showed that Richard, though powerless and friendless, is morally master of the situation. In Mr. Gielgud's production in 1937 Bolingbroke retired to the back of the stage and there sat on the throne, a massive figure, motionless, expressionless, during a large part of the scene. This in itself was a good effect but it reduced the total value of the scene by withdrawing him out of the range of Richard's irony.

I must not omit to mention that at one at least of the Stratford Festivals which he directed for many years Benson produced a series of six of the historical plays in a week, winding up on Saturday night with *Richard III*. On this occasion he so far reverted to Cibber's long-discarded version as to introduce from 3 *Henry VI* the scene of the murder of King Henry in the 'Tower. It was characteristic of Benson's Richard that after wiping his sword on his victim's coat he seized him by the ankles and lugged him out over his shoulder like a sack of coals.

Here I may conveniently pay tribute to some members of the Company who, if they did not attain to the rank of those already mentioned, were always to be trusted for artistic and intelligent acting. Alfred Brydone was a deliciously absurd Baptista and Shallow. And he was good in serious parts too. One of the best of these was the young king in *Henry VI*; pious and well-meaning; understanding why things are going wrong, but overborne by the stronger wills about him. He was an odd-looking Prospero, his red beard flecked with grey giving him something of the appearance of a Faustus. It is superfluous to add that he spoke the verse well. They all did that. I recall, for example, Arthur Whitby as Carlisle in *Richard II*, in which part he was strangely got up in purple cassock, red chasuble, and a helmet. And with the usual versatility of the Company he made a quaintly humorous Nym.

All I have yet mentioned except Lady Benson

are dead. Of those still living when I write Mr. H. O. Nicholson was, I think, the best Evans I have seen, especially praiseworthy in that he did not clown the parson but made him a real though eccentric character. And in the palmy days Mr. H. R. Hignett was usually to be seen doing good work in such parts as Horatio, Benvolio, and Aumerle.

One more name must be mentioned. I know nothing of Mr. George Fitzgerald except that in what I have called and always think of as the palmy days he was an excellent actor of secondary parts; best, I think, as the sturdy and straight-forward Page in the *Wives*, whom he rightly showed as the 'point of rest' of the play, the one element of sanity and common sense amid the general extravagance.

In the mounting of the plays Benson did his best to carry Lyceum methods round the country. In the histories we had scaling-ladders, battering-rams, and in general as much as he could give us of the pomp and circumstance of mediaeval warfare. This was done partly because in those days audiences expected Shakespeare to be thus embellished, but mainly to provide a kind of pictorial commentary on the plays. In *Henry V*, for example, the singing and dancing girls in the French camp, and the procession of monks singing a dirge after the battle. And in Benson's hands, as in Irving's, it was artistic and intelligent. They never made the plays a mere excuse for the introduction of magnificent scenery and effects.

The modern style of mounting, suggestive and symbolical rather than realistic, though it too has its dangers, is to be preferred. For one thing it does not necessitate mangling the text and transposing the scenes as the other sometimes did. A single example will suffice. In the *Merchant* all the early scenes in Venice were given before any of those at Belmont, which, in their turn, were run together to avoid the changing of elaborate sets. Absurd as this kind of thing seems now, all defects were remedied by the acting which in Benson's productions, as in Irving's, was always the most important thing.

In 1916 came his knighthood, a supreme example of the right thing done at the right moment and in the right way. In the royal box at Drury Lane, on the tercentenary of Shakespeare's death, he knelt in his stage costume and make-up to receive the accolade given with a sword provided for the occasion by the manager.

Then followed his war service, after which for another ten years or more he set to work again with a new Company that included such actors as Messrs. Robert Donat, Arthur Phillips, and Dennis Roberts. In his own acting at this time I found little falling off from his best days. It was intelligent and artistic, as always, and it was not altogether a disadvantage that he naturally could not rampage about as he had done thirty or forty years before. As a rule he now wisely confined himself to comparatively quiet parts, playing Jaques instead of Orlando, Theseus instead of

Lysander, and the King instead of the Prince in *Henry IV*. But as Hamlet, Shylock, and Richard II he still showed himself one of the most intellectual and imaginative of actors. Distinction he always had. In his later years he acquired gravity and reserved force in place of the earlier violence.

Here let me repeat that these reminiscences, for what they are worth, are my own, drawn from my memory and my notes made at the time. Therefore, as a rule, I refrain from supporting my opinions by those of better judges. Yet to illustrate the comparison of Benson with Irving, with which I began this chapter, I'll break a custom and end it with a sentence from *Amazing Monument* by Ivor Brown and George Fearon. Benson, they say, was 'one of the greatest personalities the English theatre has known in the last eighty years.' That's the point. Irving and Benson were both great personalities, and, whatever their shortcomings, they devoted their personality and genius, Irving in part, Benson almost entirely, to the producing and acting of Shakespeare's plays.

CHAPTER III

THE OLD METHODS

THE extent to which Shakespeare's plays gain or lose by lavish decoration is an old subject of controversy. In the poet's own time and for some two hundred years afterwards managers did what they could to please the spectators by means of mechanical effects, magnificent costumes, processions, and, generally, what Mr. Pepys calls 'shows.' About a hundred years ago Macready introduced elaborate scenery and crowds of well-drilled supers, one of whom in his old age described to me some of that great manager's ingenious devices. Then came Charles Kean whose combination of splendid stage pictures with pedantic archaeology was an object of admiration to some spectators and of mockery to others.

When Irving came to the throne he carried on the tradition in the manner of Macready rather than of Kean. As I have tried to show, he believed in beautiful and rather elaborate mounting, but he did not let it swamp either the play or the acting. His successor as king of the Shakespearean stage, Herbert Beerbohm Tree, reverted to the style of Kean and was inclined to allow the setting to obscure the jewel. But before I come

to him another producer of the nineties must be mentioned.

Augustin Daly was a magnate of the American theatre who included, I think, five of Shakespeare's plays in his repertory, and it is not unfair to say that he regarded them merely as an excuse for lavish stage settings and the exploitation of a famous actress. *Twelfth Night*, which I saw in 1894 at his London theatre, afterwards a home of musical comedy, may serve for an example of his methods. He spoilt the opening by beginning not with Orsino and the food of love, which strikes the keynote of the play, but with the sea-coast (I. iv), and to avoid a change of scene followed this by the second coast scene from Act II. In order that we might go on looking at Olivia's Hall, certainly a beautiful set, he ridiculously brought Viola back into it to tell Malvolio that 'on a moderate pace' she had just arrived at the place from which she had started. In the sea-coast scene he introduced a song from *The Tempest*, and later on brought Orsino into Olivia's garden to serenade her with 'Who is Sylvia,' changing the first line to 'Fair Olivia, who is she?'

But his Viola made amends for much. Ada Rehan was an actress of much beauty and charm, and she had a lovely voice. I have known many Violas, but none who spoke the 'willow cabin' speech as she spoke it; nor who showed the serious and tender side of the character so beautifully. Except for her the irruptions of Daly were of little importance to the history of the Shake-

spearean theatre. With Beerbohm Tree we return to the main stream.

It was as lessee of the Haymarket Theatre that Tree started on his Shakespearean career. Having made his name in what are called character parts, and never being afraid to aim high, he began by essaying the greatest of comic and one of the greatest of tragic characters. Though his Hamlet in 1892 was not the best I have seen I retain an affection for it because it was my first; a gentle, rather dreamy Prince subject to bursts of hysterical passion. Refinement was the dominating note, and there was a basis of truth in the gibe attributed to W. S. Gilbert that this Hamlet was 'funny without being vulgar.' A piece of business that I have not seen since was that at the end of the nunnery scene he returned to kiss Ophelia's back hair as she lay face downward on a couch. But it must be counted to him for good that he retained 'How all occasions' which many Hamlets omit.

Thanks to his skill in make-up he was a perfect Falstaff to the eye. He could assume the gait, the bearing, and the sack-and-sugar voice, and in some scenes he acted with the right unctuous humour. But he never could let well alone, and already in 1896¹ his fatal tendency to exaggeration was apparent. In the greatest scene of all he brought in the gag, 'D'ye think I didn't know ye?' which Davis, writing in 1785, says the players

¹ This was in 1 *Henry IV*. I did not see him in the *Merry Wives* till some years later.

had inserted 'from time immemorial'; and when he revived the play in 1914 his horseplay and his tomfoolery with his cups of sack went near to reducing the world's greatest comic character to the level of a common clown.

Except for two rather absurd 'tableaux' of the battle of Shrewsbury his productions at the Haymarket were not over-mounted. But when he opened Her Majesty's (soon to become His Majesty's) in 1897, and found himself master of a large theatre with every modern appliance of lighting and staging to play with, his love of magnificence went to his head, and a succession of spectacles each more splendid than the last became a burden rather than a delight.

Here it is necessary to distinguish. Unlike Daly, Tree had a real devotion to Shakespeare. He produced, in all, seventeen of his plays, more than any other West End manager of modern times. And, as his published writings show, he really thought that he was honouring the poet by embellishing his works with all the magnificence the theatre could supply. This is an arguable contention. The decisive answer to it is that, at anyrate in Tree's productions, it involved too much of that 'lopping and topping' to which Mr. Puff complains that the players have subjected his tragedy; and, what was still worse, it not infrequently reduced the acting (and he had some excellent actors in his Company) to a subordinate position. Intending to praise Shakespeare he came near to burying him under a mountain of magnificence.

To go through his revivals in detail would be almost as tedious as parts of them were on the stage, when the curtain was lowered, and usually the principals took calls, at every change of scene. Once I timed the intervals and found that altogether we sat gazing at the curtain for forty-five minutes while elaborate sets were built up or taken down behind it. Some of these were certainly very beautiful. Olivia's garden in *Twelfth Night* with rows of grassy terraces stretching away into the distance was as fine as anything ever seen on the stage. Others, such as the absurdly irrelevant Magna Carta scene in *King John* or Antony's return to Alexandria, though splendid in themselves, were mere excrescences inspired by the love of display for its own sake.

And to make room for them he played havoc with Shakespeare's text. For a typical and comparatively harmless example of his methods, in *Much Ado* he omitted Don Pedro's lovely lines on the dawn and gave us instead, at a different point in the play, an elaborate representation of day-break, the stage growing gradually lighter amid the twitterings of mechanical birds. Presumably he thought that this would give more pleasure than Shakespeare's lines well spoken.

Because the lady who played Oberon—in a style reminiscent of Prince Charming in the pantomime—was an accomplished vocalist, he actually brought her on to sing, 'Ye spotted snakes,' an absurdity which went a long way towards making nonsense of the Oberon-Titania story. And,

presumably for the same reason, when she came to the lines beginning 'I know a bank,' she first spoke and then sang them.

Tree was an adept at inventing ingenious and unnecessary business. When Benedick says 'the practice of it lives in John the Bastard,' he had to have the thought suggested to him by catching sight of Don John, who at that moment had no business to be on the stage at all, hovering in the background. Shylock's return after Jessica's elopement and knocking on the door as the curtain falls was invented by Irving. Tree went one better by showing him rushing about his deserted house and finding his strong room rifled. Thus does one improvement on Shakespeare lead to another.

His own defence alike of this 'ever thought-swarming but idealess'¹ embroidery, and of his scenic splendour, was that he wanted to 'make Shakespeare interesting.' He did not understand that Shakespeare is interesting by his own merits if producers will let him speak for himself. As it turned out, his methods had exactly the opposite effect. In some of his revivals I calculated that the cuts amounted to about a third of the play. Yet the long waits, the over-elaborate business, and the languid manner in which he himself

¹ The adjectives which Coleridge applies to Bishop Warburton as a commentator on Shakespeare's plays serve equally well to describe some, at least, of Tree's methods of presenting them on the stage.

sometimes played, effectually deprived us of any appetite for more.

To conclude these adverse criticisms let me quote some paragraphs from an article I contributed to a magazine in 1914.

'Macbeth meeting Banquo and his son attempts to pat Fleance on the head, but the boy spots him for a wrong 'un and dodges out of the way. This sort of business is not worth the easy trouble of inventing it. There is an elaborate episode of escorting Duncan to bed. His train includes a harper, and there is singing which turns to a hymn as the king blesses the kneeling company.¹ When the stage is empty the witches enter and indulge in a few malevolent cackles. There is nothing of all this in Shakespeare, but it takes time and enables managers to lament that "under modern conditions" it is impossible to produce the plays without cutting large pieces out. . . .

'Sir Herbert Tree can never quite bring himself to trust his audience. He is not sure, for instance, whether they will see the joke of Portia's sprightly description of those suitors who do not appear in the play—Shakespeare's play, that is—for at the end of this passage he must needs bring them on the stage to take leave of her in dumb show. It is his way to leave as little as possible to the intelligence and imagination of the spectator. . . .

'In one of the scenes of *A Midsummer Night's*

¹ In 1896, when I first saw Benson in the play, Duncan entered as the curtain fell on I. vii. This was harmless enough. Tree characteristically embroidered on it.

Dream a number of live rabbits are let loose to run about the stage and effectively distract attention from the actors. This is the natural result of their presence, and forms rather a caustic comment on the value which Sir Herbert sets on acting as an element in the production.'

When I wrote that I was a younger and more severe critic than I am now. Moreover the battle for the restoration of Shakespeare unadulterated to the stage, of which I shall speak later, had begun and I wanted to strike a blow in it. There was much that was good in Tree's Shakespearean revivals. The best of them to my mind was *Twelfth Night*, and his own Malvolio was a real triumph. Well made-up, as he always was, with heavy vacuous face, he built up the character with a wealth of minute and suggestive detail. It was characteristic that he carried what used to be called a quizzing glass, which gave occasion for many pompous gestures. He was the first Malvolio to wear a night-gown in the kitchen scene, a refinement that has been adopted by most of his successors. In fact it is true, I think, to say that every subsequent Malvolio has, directly or indirectly, owed something to him. He made the letter scene convincing by eschewing the stupid business of the listeners shouting in Malvolio's ear, and similar absurdities which were then usual on the stage. In place of these his uneasy suspicions of something or somebody about were splendid, and so were his patronizing apostrophes to Jove after he has read the letter, and his little, self-admiring laugh.

Finally the skill with which in the last scene he showed Malvolio's loyalty to Olivia, and his reluctance to give her away, crowned one of the most satisfying performances I have ever seen.

And to make it the more delightful all the other parts were well played. The best of them, even better in its way than the Malvolio, was the Sir Andrew of Norman Forbes, a masterly study of brainlessness. There was no clowning. He got all his effects quietly. On his first entrance his startled look when he caught sight of Maria over Sir Toby's shoulder as the knights embraced, was by itself worth the money. And his foolish complacency as he listened to the reading of the challenge or gazed in admiration at his own leg is a delight to recall.

Tree's first Shakespearean production at Her Majesty's, *Julius Caesar* in 1898, was also one of his best, not only for magnificence but also for the excellence of the acting. The lure of the two big speeches induced him to take Antony himself, but his best moment in the part was his stealthy entrance after Caesar's murder. And he followed it up skilfully by the crafty manner in which Antony wins concessions from the conspirators, while every now and then his horror and rage break through. In the Forum speech he was too deliberate and tortuous, seeming to try to work on the reason of the mob rather than on their passions. Here the crowd played their parts better than the orator, for which Tree as producer must have due credit.

The Brutus was Lewis Waller, of whom I shall speak later. The third and most effective of the chief parts was taken by Franklin McLeay, a young actor who did not live to fulfil his early promise. His vigorous and picturesque Cassius I couple with Frank Rodney's as the best I have seen. A little stagy, to be sure, but that was all the better as a contrast to the Olympian calm of the Brutus and the quiet deliberation of the Antony.

There were many other good and some excellent individual performances in Tree's revivals, but as a whole these revivals were marred by the defects I have indicated. Moreover, his laudable ambition to produce the best of Shakespeare's plays led him to attempt characters for which he was not suited.

His Malvolio was a success because he could build up a convincing likeness of the man by a multiplicity of small touches. His King John was cleverly built up in the same way by means of subtle detail. This revival also was one of his artistic successes. Like *Henry V* it can stand a good deal of splendour in production, and Tree's last scene, the Orchard of Swinstead Abbey, was a beautiful stage-picture. Here his own death-scene was striking and realistic but not overdone; and it was followed, characteristically, by a dawn effect to symbolize the new reign. There were three other first-rate pieces of acting. Two of them will be described later in this chapter. The third was the Elinor of Mrs. Crowe, formerly Miss Kate Bateman. An actress of the old

school she showed how that school played Shakespeare in the grand manner. That does not mean that she ranted. Her Elinor had subtlety as well as intensity. My two visits to this revival were the only times I saw her in Shakespeare on the stage, but in Shakespeare Society at Winchester I had heard her read Lady Macbeth, a part she played with Irving at the Lyceum before Ellen Terry.

When Tree tried his elaborate method with Bottom, making him a burlesque of a star actor, the result was disastrous. And he was no tragedian. His Richard II and Macbeth were much inferior to Benson's, though it is to his credit that he restored Lady Macduff to the theatre. A more questionable innovation, though in its way an enjoyable one, was the entry of Richard and Bolingbroke into London in *Richard II*. This was not entirely an addition to Shakespeare for it was based on the description in V. ii. Translated into action this became a realistic picture of mediaeval street life, full of bustle and excitement.

Tree's Othello was a tragedy in more senses than one. He had one exciting moment of barbaric affection for Desdemona when she denies having lost the handkerchief. But the honours went to Laurence Irving, the best Iago of my time. Some Iagos must be perpetually thrusting their villainy down our throats. This one only now and then let the audience (never the other characters) see his diabolical wickedness peeping out from behind the appearance of a plain and homely

young soldier. In his soliloquies one could really see him thinking things out as his schemes gradually took shape in his mind. A most interesting contrast this to the sharp, sardonic Iago of his brother, H. B. Irving, with its Mephistophelean humour and its grim intensity. In this part more than in any other both the talented brothers in their different ways reminded me of their illustrious father, whose Iago was before my time.

H. B. Irving played it to the Othello of Lewis Waller. And that brings me to the third set of the revivals which form the subject of this chapter. Except for his Henry V, Waller's best Shakespearian parts were those he played under Tree's management. Handsome and stalwart in appearance he was the ideal Hotspur and Falconbridge. With his magnificent voice, strong, resonant, and flexible, he could give the fiery rhetoric its full effect, pouring it out in a splendid flow instead of dropping it out half a line at a time which would have been Tree's method. He played Hotspur's first scene in just the right vein of choleric impatience made sympathetic by his chivalrous imagination, and at length boiling over when he cannot remember the name of Berkeley Castle. Mr. Matheson Lang who played the part with Tree in a later revival marred it by too much spluttering, through a misunderstanding of Lady Percy's reference to her husband's 'speaking thick.'

Waller could also assume the blunt and brawny humour of these swashbucklers. In the first scene of *King John*, for instance, he had some capital

business, probably invented by Tree, showing how Philip bullied his weakling brother at home.

Brutus is a more serious part and I have never seen any one play it better than Waller. A calm and dignified, rather self-conscious superiority, is the dominant note of the character. And this he had alike in the unruffled equanimity with which he overruled the wiser counsels of the other conspirators, and in his wrath, terrible from its very calmness, in the quarrel scene.

After his success as Hotspur it was natural that he should want to play Henry V, and his revival of this play was about the best example in my experience of what I have called the old methods of producing Shakespeare. Better than any of Tree's at His Majesty's because he illustrated the play with as much beauty and magnificence as it will stand without overdoing it. In a play like *Henry V*, which makes little demand on the actors compared with the great tragedies and comedies, the producer can reasonably let himself go in the matter of display. In Waller's production the scene in Picardy with a view of the flooded Somme was about the most beautiful I have ever seen, and that at Southampton with the gorgeously decked ships and all the bustle of embarkation was not far behind it.

He included the Chorus, which Benson omitted in his earlier revivals (he restored it later), but like Benson he made the mistake of running together the two comic scenes in Act II. No doubt this was done to avoid scene-shifting but it is rather

indecent because it involves discussing Falstaff's death-bed before the breath is well out of his body. Neither producer could resist the effect to be got out of the French king's madness though Shakespeare gives no hint of it. Waller allowed him intervals of vigorous sanity while in Benson's production he was a crafty old dotard (something like an exaggerated version of Irving's Louis XI) whose attention is divided between affairs of state and a fool who amuses him with cards and a cup-and-ball.

Judging from the number of times I saw him in it I should say *Henry V* was one of Benson's favourite productions, and as Waller also revived the play several times I was able to compare them pretty closely. In some ways Waller's could hardly be bettered. The qualities I have noted in his Hotspur, the gallant bearing, the trumpet voice, the blunt humour, were all raised to a higher power in the hero-king who is also the king of good fellows. The climax of his performance was the last few lines of the Crispin speech which by a bold and happy device he spoke at the front of the stage with his back to the audience, while his followers knelt in a semi-circle facing him. This swept the audience into an enthusiasm such as I have seldom known in the theatre. In Benson's acting, as in his voice, there was something hard and inflexible which put such effects beyond his reach. But elsewhere his interpretation cut deeper in its austere and imaginative beauty. He was at his best in his first scene, in that with the con-

spirators, where Waller lacked the necessary sternness, and in the prayer scene, in which Waller was frigid and uninspiring.

Waller's limitations showed themselves also when he attempted the great characters. He could express neither the youthful passion of Romeo nor Othello's nobility of soul. He never dominated the play as Othello should. For example, his first words, "'Tis better as it is,' which should give the keynote to the character, were interjected almost unnoticed into Iago's speech.

The last time I saw him was in his own revival of 1 *Henry IV* in 1909, when the impetuous gallantry of his Hotspur was as good as ever. He had the wisdom to engage that excellent actor Louis Calvert for Falstaff. Calvert's Pandolph was one of the best things in Tree's *King John*; a perfect incarnation of the temporal power of the Papacy, equally imperturbable in success or adversity as he moved steadily forward amid the wranglings of kings and nobles, along the path his policy had marked out. Only once, in the twitch of the hands as John approaches to make his submission, did the human nature of the man break out in his moment of triumph from under the immobility of the priest.

His Falstaff I had already seen in his own revival of 2 *Henry IV*, and a very good performance it was, broad rather than subtle. By far the most memorable thing in that revival was the Shallow of Laurence Irving, a representation of weak-brained senility I have never seen equalled. And

it was gloriously comic. I laugh as I write at the remembrance of his showing Wart how to manage his caliver and then sinking onto a seat, panting with exhaustion. And his reception of Falstaff's jests was better still because it was less obviously funny. After the knight had spoken Shallow would gaze at him with open mouth and vacant eye. Then you saw a light break upon his face and a burst of cackling laughter followed. This Shallow and the Sir Andrew of Norman Forbes are the only performances that have brought to my mind Charles Lamb's description of Dodd in his essay on 'Some of the Old Actors.'

If, as I have tried to show, splendour in mounting the plays had on the whole an unfortunate effect, it was far from obliterating the actor altogether. I have mentioned some first-rate pieces of acting in these productions and I could add others to them. The real case against it was that it tended to make people think of the stage setting as the most important element in the plays. It was for that reason that lovers of Shakespeare as an acted dramatist welcomed the very different style of production which I am now to describe.

CHAPTER IV

THE RETURN TO SHAKESPEARE

ON the professional stage Forbes Robertson began it in a tentative, almost timid, way by restoring to *Hamlet* some of the passages usually omitted. This involved more rapid speaking and shorter intervals than were then usual, and it is significant of the prevailing view of the manner in which Shakespeare should be presented that one critic scornfully dubbed the production '*Hamlet* in five laps.' The experiment had no perceptible effect, for it was made in 1897, the very year in which Tree opened Her Majesty's.

Yet even while he was engaged on that series of revivals in which the old methods reached their zenith the quiet and little known work of Mr. William Poel and the Elizabethan Stage Society was preparing the way for better things. The purpose of this Society was to produce the plays of Shakespeare and some of his contemporaries with Elizabethan methods of staging. They acted *The Merchant of Venice*, for instance, before curtains, with an upper stage, a minimum of furniture, and an almost complete text with only one short interval. This was the first play I ever saw produced in this fashion and I was surprised to find

that I not only did not regret but in fact hardly noticed the absence of the pomp and circumstance to which I was accustomed.

The acting was a different matter. Mr. Poel played Shylock in a red wig and shabby clothes, with a shuffling gait and a querulous manner. His purpose was to represent the serio-comic villain that an Elizabethan audience may be supposed to have demanded. It was an interesting experiment, but most of the other performers were unequal to their parts. If these methods of production were to prevail a higher level of acting was required.

And this is what Mr. Granville Barker supplied in his productions of *Winter's Tale*, *Twelfth Night*, and *Midsummer Night's Dream* at the Savoy in 1912-14. Now for the first time for many years we had the complete text of three of Shakespeare's plays well spoken by good actors in settings that were simple as well as beautiful. The two things hang together. By teaching his actors to speak rapidly and yet intelligibly, and by reducing to a minimum the time occupied in changing the scenery Mr. Barker was able to give the complete text of the plays without exceeding the usual time of performance.

And how much they gained by it only those who had experienced the old methods can tell. After what I have said in the previous chapters I shall not be accused of undervaluing the excellent elocution of the actors of the older school. But, as I have also said, it was often marred by too great

deliberation and too many and too long pauses. In these productions it was a joy to hear the lines rapidly spoken yet without slurring or gabbling. As William Archer once wrote, 'It is when the actor is short-winded that the poet seems long-winded.' A joy also to see the actors taking their proper place against an appropriate background of scenery instead of being reduced to mere figures in the foreground of an elaborate stage-picture, and to be delivered from the long and frequent waits which transformed the play into a series of selections. Instead of this we could enjoy the play as Shakespeare wrote it, a complete and artistic whole.

For example, in *Winter's Tale* I was delighted to find how amusing V.ii (which Tree omitted altogether) proved on the stage, thanks to the excellent acting and elocution of Messrs. Arthur Whitby (Autolycus), H. O. Nicholson and Leon Quartermaine (Old Shepherd and Clown), and Nigel Playfair as Paulina's Steward. Two of these I was pleased to note were former members of Benson's Company, and so was Mr. Henry Ainley who played Leontes and Malvolio. Mr. (afterwards Sir Nigel) Playfair was already known to me as a capital comedian from his work as an amateur at Oxford. His Stephano in the O.U.D.S. *Tempest* in 1894 remains the most natural and amusing I have seen. Mr. Whitby was also a first-rate Sir Toby. Without in the least toning down the richness of the character he made it entirely natural, letting us see that Toby was a

decayed gentleman, not a buffoon. Alike as Hermione, Viola, and Helena, Miss Lillah McCarthy showed herself a mistress of pathetic acting. In the second of these parts her recognition of Sebastian was most beautiful and affecting; and so, in the third, was her reconciliation with Demetrius in Act IV, a moment the possibilities of which are often overlooked.

After seeing the *Winter's Tale* in 1912 I wrote, 'This ought to (but it won't) put an end to the era of "arranged" texts and elaborate changes of scene.' The parenthesis shows me a too quick despairer. It did. This revival and the two that followed were, in the literal sense of a much-abused word, epoch-making. For they inaugurated a new epoch of Shakespearean production. More recently Mr. Barker has given us in his *Prefaces to Shakespeare* the most illuminating commentaries that have been written for many years. But in our gratitude for these we should not forget his earlier and more practical achievement. Reversing the method of Mr. Squeers he first 'went and did it,' and afterwards told us how it should be done.

The work of the Elizabethan Stage Society was the foreshadowing of a revolution. By transferring the same methods to the professional stage and adding what they had lacked Mr. Barker brought it about. This revolution is the most important thing that has happened in the history of the Shakespearean stage during the last fifty years, and its development and effects will be the principal subject of the remaining chapters of this book.

For though we can now see Mr. Barker's revivals to have been the turning point they did not produce their effect all at once. Benson continued for the most part in his old courses which I for one would not have had him change. In Lady Benson's apt quotation he was 'too far in years to be a pupil now.' In 1913 Forbes Robertson gave his farewell performances in the old style. And Tree continued on his stately way, sublimely indifferent to the growing belief that it was out of date, until he went to America in 1915 shortly before his death.

No doubt the Great War helped the new movement by imposing economy on stage production as on other things. And, after it, came the complete triumph of the reformed methods in the years when Mr. Robert Atkins was Miss Baylis's prime minister at the Old Vic.

CHAPTER V

THE OLD VIC

IN the last sentence of the preceding chapter I very nearly wrote 'Mr. Atkins's reign.' But that would not do. While Miss Lilian Baylis lived no one reigned at the Old Vic but herself. If Mr. Barker was the hero of the last chapter she is the heroine of this, and it must begin with a heartfelt tribute to her most heroic struggle against all kinds of difficulties to keep the flag flying over what, with entirely justifiable pride, she loved to call 'the home of Shakespeare' in London. If she is seldom mentioned by name in the pages that follow I shall not forget, and I hope the reader will not forget, that she was always the unseen ruler and guide, and that her courage, her devotion, her labours, often against what seemed overwhelming odds, were the inspiration and the support of a great achievement.

I divide my playgoing at the Old Vic into three periods. First the years before Mr. Atkins became producer; secondly the period of his work there and that of his two successors, that is to say from

* I include in the term the performances in which I have seen the Company at Sadler's Wells and one or two other theatres.

1920 to 1933; and thirdly from 1933 to the present time. The second of these periods is for me a golden age. Certainly I have seen better and more memorable performances than many that were contained in it. But as certainly, in its combination of the three elements of the acting, the text, and the mounting, in due proportion, it excelled any series of Shakespearean revivals of the last fifty years.

Before I give my reasons for this conclusion I must say something about what I have called the first period. It was early in the Great War that Miss Baylis set out to give a series of Shakespeare's plays at popular prices, but for various reasons I did not pay my first visit to the Vic until January, 1918. I am glad to have seen the huge theatre in its unreformed state. The cheap and not over-comfortable seats, the weird underground lavatories, the coffee-bar at the back of the pit where one was served by men in shirt-sleeves and cloth caps, the unsophisticated, enthusiastic audiences, the excitement and speeches of first and last nights—all added a touch of adventure to the experience.

The producer at that time was Ben Greet of whom I shall say more in a later chapter, and the leading members of the cast were Mr. Russell Thorndike, recently invalided out of the Army, and his sister Sybil. I had seen Miss Thorndike before I ever went to the Vic, but it was not until my first visit there that I saw her in Shakespeare. Since then I have never missed an opportunity of seeing her in a Shakespearean part, and, at the risk

of what may be rather a long digression, I will say what I have to say about her now.

During the war some of the men's parts at the Vic were played by women, and I must confess to feeling some apprehension when on looking at the programme of *King Lear* I saw that a woman was to take the part of the Fool, a reversion, as I thought, to a bad old custom. I was quickly reassured. Miss Thorndike's halting gait, hanging lip, and nervous demeanour suggested the half-witted youth perfectly, and the childish pleasure the Fool took in his little jokes and snatches of song completed a brilliant piece of acting.

But it is, naturally, her success as Shakespeare's heroines that impels me to salute Miss Thorndike as the greatest Shakespearean actress, after Ellen Terry, that I have seen. I have already said that she is the only Portia I can rank with her great predecessor. Her silent acting in the three casket scenes was worth going far to see; the varying emotions showing themselves but kept under control by serene power. In the Trial Scene she was quieter than most Portias, there was no staginess; but when she begs the ring she rightly showed the rather hysterical excitement of reaction after a great strain.

Of her Imogen and Hermione it is enough to say that they did not come short of the characters they represented. As Imogen she once broke the charm for a moment by boxing Cloten's ears when he pestered her in her distress at the loss of her bracelet. The action was excusable enough but I

was glad she omitted it when she revived *Cymbeline* under her own management. In the statue scene of *Winter's Tale* the vision of Miss Thorndike radiating calm beauty, spiritual as well as physical, is an abiding memory. Her golden voice and delicious gurgling laugh were never used to better effect than in her *Rosalind*. When the Vic Company gave *Henry V* in Elizabethan style she appeared as Chorus in the character of a brisk young player. She jetted and strutted and swung her arms. She rattled and argued and gesticulated. This was amusing as a change, but I would rather she had declaimed the choruses seriously as well she could.

Until the church scene her Beatrice was disappointing. She dealt out her wit like a queen conferring favours rather than a merry girl rattling out chaff. When Hero says, 'Look how Beatrice like a lapwing runs,' Miss Thorndike crept slowly into the harbour like Lady Macbeth going to Duncan's chamber. But when Beatrice has to be passionate, almost tragic, she rose to the full height of her powers. One of the crucial tests of any Beatrice is her delivery of the words, 'It is a man's part, but not yours.' If she intentionally raises a laugh by this line she has not understood the character, if unintentionally she has not made her audience understand it. Needless to say Miss Thorndike avoided this pitfall. She spoke the last three words as if checking herself in an appeal for Benedick's help. Nor did she roar out her 'Kill Claudio.' It was quiet but intensely

strong. And Mr. Lewis Casson did not, like some Benedicks, indulge in a long pause before replying, a foolish bit of staginess. The whole scene was played by both with splendid force.

Not to dwell too long over Miss Thorndike's performances I must come to her and Mr. Casson's revivals of *Henry VIII* and *Macbeth*. The mounting of the first was beyond adequate praise. For a perfect effect produced with the utmost economy of space and means I have seen nothing equal to the Coronation procession. With true artistic sense Miss Thorndike as Katherine disdained extraneous aids and relied solely on her acting. Her make-up and dress showed the Queen if, like Tennyson's spinster, not 'down-right plain,' at any rate severely unattractive. There may have been some intention of suggesting excuse for Henry which would accord with the spirit of the play. Her address to the Surveyor was a solemn appeal which suited the character better than such a tirade as we read of in the story of Mrs. Siddons. When passion was called for, in the Trial Scene and that with the Cardinals, she let fly with fine effect.

I cannot write, even briefly, of this excellent revival without a word of gratitude for the Old Lady of Miss Ada King, one of the very best pieces of acting in a small part I have ever seen. She was perfectly natural and got every grain of comic effect out of her lines without the slightest appearance of effort. And the expression of her face in repose was worth going many miles to see.

Miss Thorndike's Lady Macbeth is, to my mind, the top of her achievement. In her reading of the letter, her voice rather deepened from its natural pitch, amazement and excitement were blended, the latter prevailing as the emotion heightens. She made an unforgettable picture in her red dress as she stood framed in the doorway awaiting Duncan's approach. Another memory picture is the listening figure crouched against the wall while the murder is doing. And then her bold, almost jaunty, exit with the daggers! In the sleep-walking scene she spoke in a dull, flat voice, sometimes breaking into a wail of utter misery. I have never known wretchedness presented on the stage as she presented it in this scene by her attitudes as well as by her voice.

I could write more of this great actress, but it is full time that I returned to the Vic. It is a real proof of the inspiring genius of Miss Baylis that during those difficult years of war her company attacked long and exacting plays like *Lear* and *Cymbeline* and *Richard III* in a spirit of rattling courage, and gave intelligent and enjoyable performances of them.

They did not depend on one or two stars. When Miss Thorndike left, her place was capably filled by Miss Florence Saunders of whom I shall speak later. But here I must say that when, owing to the lack of male actors, she played Lucio her man-about-town swagger was a real triumph in a small way. A word of grateful remembrance is also due to the veteran Ernest Meads, who spoke his lines

in a ringing voice as if he were not afraid of them, and gave distinction to any part, however small. As a Murderer in *Richard III*, for example, he was grimly humorous, but did not rely on being merely funny. He was the true Elizabethan hired villain who seriously means business.

The leading man was Mr. Russell Thorndike. As Iachimo he cleverly suggested the *blasé*, decadent patrician. His Richard was splendidly vigorous though the audience occasionally laughed in the wrong places. It is, I suppose, due to Irving that Richard is now accepted as a comic character. One cannot imagine an audience laughing much when Edmund Kean played it. On the other hand Mr. Thorndike's Iago was too self-conscious in his hypocrisy. Private jokes between actor and audience which are appropriate to the crude villainy of Richard are out of place on the higher levels of tragedy.

Hitherto the plays had been produced more or less in the old style and in conventional stage versions with omissions and sometimes transpositions of scenes. The scenery and stage furnishings were as realistic as the chronically depleted resources of the theatre would allow. But the Bosworth scenes in *Richard III* were as well arranged as I have ever seen them: the battle-field in the middle and the tents of the leaders side by side at the back. This was in the true Elizabethan spirit without pedantry. Yet they would sometimes indulge in follies worthy of Tree at his worst. After meeting with the Witches Macbeth pro-

duced pencil and paper, quickly scribbled a few words, and handed the paper to a soldier, directing him in dumb show what to do with it. When in due course Lady Macbeth appeared the same soldier entered and gave her the letter which she proceeded to read. The accumulated absurdities of this need no exposure. Less reprehensible and more amusing was a device adopted in *Measure for Measure*. When the disguised Duke wanted the Provost to spare Claudio instead of spending a lot of words over it he just slipped off his disguise, the Provost mutely recognized his sovereign, the Duke resumed his beard and habit, and the play proceeded. An unintended joke in *Othello* was that when the Moor raised his arms above his head his loose sleeves fell back and revealed that his dark colour did not extend beyond his wrists; the converse of the story of the actor who blacked himself all over.

There were none of these happy-go-lucky methods when Mr. Atkins took charge. For five years, from 1920 to 1925, he went on producing play after play, some that had not been seen in London within living memory, *Timon*, *Pericles*, *Titus Andronicus*, *Henry VI*, as well as the established favourites. I do not say that all his revivals were perfect at every point. The acting by no means always reached the standard of the Benson Company in the palmy days. And there were distressing failures to speak the verse properly. For example Marina's—

My heart

Leaps to be gone into my mother's bosom.

I can hear in my mind's ear how those words should be spoken. At the Vic they became a prosaic remark by a young lady to her partner at a dance, as if she were saying, 'Excuse me a minute, I must just go and speak to mother.' But in spite of such lapses Mr. Atkins's productions and those of his two successors justified themselves because they went on the principle, Trust Shakespeare and he won't let you down.

On this principle they gave us much more of the plays than had recently been spoken on the stage except in Mr. Granville Barker's revivals. Mr. Atkins's *Lear* lasted for three and a half hours, and must have included more of the text than had been heard in the theatre for over two hundred years. His *Richard III* was longer still. From half-past seven to midnight a crowded house enjoyed every minute of it; a remarkable tribute to the policy of trusting Shakespeare even when he is a good way below his best.

Needless to say, no time was wasted in changing the scenery. The usual arrangement was one or two set scenes, appropriate and sufficient to suggest the atmosphere of the play without unnecessary fuss, and the rest before plain curtains. The lines were spoken rapidly and intelligibly without superfluous by-play, if also, as I have said, sometimes with too little care of the metre. And every now and then Mr. Atkins would produce a stroke of genius. For example, when the curtain rose on *Love's Labour's Lost* the King strode down to the front of the stage and delivered the opening lines

straight at the audience, only turning to the others at 'Therefore, brave warriors.' This had an electrical effect.

The policy of acting the plays in full also did away with the old superstition that every Act, if not every scene, must end with a bang, something to rouse applause and cause the curtain to be raised two or three times. For example, Mr. Atkins was the first producer in my experience who had the sense to end the Second Act of *Macbeth* with the Old Man. And as usual Shakespeare justified himself when he was allowed to have his own way. This quiet bit of dialogue proved a relief after the strain of the murder scenes, and a great improvement on the common theatrical device of bringing down the curtain on a general roar of 'Well contented.'

In the same play Mr. Atkins showed how foolish his predecessors had been to hack the Malcolm-Macduff dialogue about, by the simple expedient of giving it in full.

Hardly any play presented such difficulties to the old-fashioned producer as *Antony and Cleopatra* with its many short scenes and frequent changes of place. Mr. Atkins and his successors overcame these difficulties by simply ignoring them. There was no need for realistic scenery. The entrance of the various characters (sometimes in a delightful medley of classical and Elizabethan costumes) and the dialogue itself showed us clearly enough where we were. So in *Julius Caesar* Tree spent much pains and ingenuity to make the

mutual defiances of the opposing generals seem plausible by perching them on high rocks with a ravine between them. At the Vic they simply marched on from opposite sides before a plain curtain, spoke their lines, wheeled about and marched off again, and no one thought that anything was amiss. In this play also the same set which had been 'a Public Place' reappeared a little later, with the addition of a garden seat, as 'Brutus' Orchard.' Again, every one was perfectly satisfied because we were relying for our enjoyment on the words and the acting. And I for one had the additional satisfaction of reflecting how some of us would have been surprised, and perhaps shocked, if Tree had not given us two elaborate and quite different scenes for the two places.

Sometimes I thought Mr. Atkins's mounting almost too austere; as when he allowed *The Tempest* only one scene, and that consisting of no more than some brown cloths heaped about the stage. There were only two 'shapes' in the banquet scene, and the spirit-dogs were left to the imagination of the spectator. Yet it was really startling to see how this play, on which managers had been wont to lavish every possible kind of display, proved far more delightful when it was allowed to depend solely on good acting. One did not miss, or rather one was relieved to be without, the elaborate ballet of spirits dressing up Ariel as a sea-nymph, with which we had been regaled at His Majesty's, or (in another revival) Ariel trying to produce an

illusion of flying by dangling from a wire as plain to sight as a ship's cable.

Mr. Atkins is not only an excellent producer, he is also an excellent actor. In my early days the producer as a separate official was unknown. The actor-manager was his own producer, and I cannot imagine what Irving or Tree would have said if it had been suggested that some one else should 'produce' their plays for them.

Mr. Atkins did sometimes take a part himself. He was a good Sir Toby though rather too sombre for that merry and mischievous old soul. His Richard III was excellent both in the play of that name and in *Henry VI*. Here he skilfully distinguished the younger from the older Richard, making him more care-free and less sardonic, though he had the right deep humour, the 'grumbling voice' that Margaret attributes to him, and a most intriguing laugh, loud and neighing, which would have been very inappropriate in the later play. But I was surprised that he did not follow the arrangement of the Bosworth scene that I have noted above.¹ Instead he placed only Richard's tent on the stage, so that after threatening him the Ghosts had to turn and shout their encouragement to Richmond who was supposed to be asleep 'off,' and apparently some way off.

The best of Mr. Atkins's individual performances was Caliban. He showed with superlative art the malevolent brute nature with the dim, half-formed, human intellect just breaking through. A

¹ p. 67.

real triumph. And it was matched by the Ariel of Miss Agnes Carter. A shy, rather sullen, eerie creature, she came, I thought, as near to the true Ariel as a human being can. These two pieces of acting and the excellent team-work of the rest which avoided any suggestion of dullness in the Alonzo scenes, made this revival one of the most enjoyable I have ever seen.

In 1925 Mr. Atkins left the Vic and was succeeded as producer first by Mr. Andrew Leigh and four years later by Mr. Harcourt Williams, old Bensonians both. For the most part they followed Mr. Atkins's methods, though with somewhat less austerity. Their stage settings were usually more elaborate though always in good taste, and they never bored us with long waits while the scenery was changed. With one or sometimes two intervals the scenes followed one another without a break. A single set, as beautiful in its quiet way as all but the best of the realistic stage pictures of former managers, would start its career in *Romeo* as a Public Place, and then with slight modifications would serve with equal effect for Capulet's Hall, his Orchard, and his Family Mausoleum.

They also allowed more extraneous business. Mr. Williams brought Lear's knights onto the stage to carouse rowdily during the dialogue with Goneril. This I thought helped the scene. Contrariwise his elaboration of Falstaff's first scene in *Henry IV* was ill conceived: the Prince asleep in bed, Falstaff coming in to call him, and Poins following with razor and lather to shave him. If

any one is asleep at this point it is Falstaff, as Tree (I think) showed him, outside a tavern. Hal's first speech does not suggest a just waking man. Mr. Leigh, also, made a mistake in allowing Romeo to faint ridiculously in his servant's arms when he hears of Juliet's death, and then to recover sufficiently to bellow, 'I defy you, stars,' as if he expected his voice to reach them. The words should be spoken in a low, intense tone. For Romeo to bellow at this point is as bad as for Macduff not to bellow his last speech in *Macbeth* IV. iii. It was odd, too, that in the Ball Scene Romeo not only carried his mask in his hand (that is, or was, usual on the stage) but hardly ever lifted it to his face. While Tybalt was recognizing him by his voice his face was as openly shown to the whole Capulet assembly as Tybalt's own.

One is willing to have a good deal left to the imagination when it is intelligently done, but carelessness like this detracts from one's enjoyment. I remember once in *Macbeth* (not at the Vic) the Murderer at his first appearance already had on his face the bloodstains which Macbeth in a later scene was to observe as the result of the murder of Banquo. Still worse was it, and this I am sorry to say was at the Vic, that Polonius not only sat down uninvited in the presence of the King and Queen, but remained seated after the Queen had risen, which so punctilious a courtier would never do. Sometimes these lapses do not disturb but only amuse, as I was amused when a Sir Toby in

Elizabethan costume read the challenge from a type-written paper. But he ought not to have let us see the typewriting.

Both Mr. Leigh and Mr. Williams sometimes left out more than Mr. Atkins did. To give the full texts was a heroic achievement, but there is no great harm in cutting out passages which for one reason or another do not go well on the modern stage. Formerly such omissions included words and phrases which were thought indecent. And this was sometimes carried to rather absurd lengths. If there was a cant of prudery then there is a cant of anti-prudery now. It seems to be a rule that whatever else you leave out you must by no means deprive your audience of any obscenity. Fortunately this rule is not universally followed.

Another innovation is in the pronunciation of proper names. I have already mentioned Aumerle.¹ It is not uncommon to hear Glahms for Glamis, which, whatever it may be in Scotland, is a dissyllable in Shakespeare. Jaques which also used to be a dissyllable is now sometimes, again not always, Jarks. I have even heard Charles called Sharl, presumably in an attempt at the French pronunciation of his name; Lucio, Luchio (though other Italian names are spoken in the English way), and Leontes, Layontes. After this it was scarcely a surprise to hear the Ch of Charmian most barbarously pronounced soft, or Titania as Titaynia. In one revival of *As You Like It* Aliena became Alíena to the ruin of

¹ Above, p. 17.

the verse in which the name occurs. I have heard Lucentio in the *Shrew* make no fewer than three false quantities in his quotation of two lines from Ovid, and Don Pedro in *Much Ado* say 'Phillymon' for Philémon in the line,

My visor is Philemon's roof, within the house is Jove.

Mistakes like these, which would have been impossible even thirty years ago, bear out what I said in Chapter I about culture in the theatre. They also confirm my belief that a good many modern actors either do not know or do not care that much of Shakespeare is supposed to be in verse.

The reader may be inclined to say with Dr. Johnson, 'of these trifles enough.' But they are not trifles when they interfere with one's enjoyment of the play and reveal a lack of care in actor or producer. Another stumbling-block to me is the introduction of new and unfamiliar tunes to the songs. This, I admit, is a matter of personal taste, and better judges of music may not agree. But to me it is like setting new music to the Savoy operas.

But it is time to have done with carping and to return more particularly to the Vic and to the most important thing, the acting. Here I find myself in a difficulty. Of late years the composition of the Old Vic Company has changed so much and so often that it has almost ceased to be a repertory company at all. Sometimes eminent actors or actresses have joined it for a season or even for a single production. Thanks to this practice

I had the happiness of seeing that splendid actress of the old school, Genevieve Ward, as Queen Margaret (twenty-four years after I had seen her play the part with Irving) and Volumnia. For her the triumph scene in *Coriolanus* was a triumph indeed, not only grand but beautiful and affecting.

Nevertheless it is, I think, because of these frequent changes of cast that, in spite of many excellent individual performances, I cannot rank the acting as a whole so high as that of the Bensonians in their best days when the same company played together week after week and year after year.

During the time that Mr. Atkins and his two successors were in charge I saw the Company, with frequent changes of membership among the leading players, give more than seventy performances of Shakespeare's plays, and with so much material to choose from I can select only a few names to add to those already mentioned.

The first must be that of Florence Saunders. With her splendid presence, voluptuous beauty, and fine voice and elocution she could play 'villainesses' with a mixture of savagery, subtlety, and rich lasciviousness that exactly suited such parts as Goneril, in which she looked magnificent and dominated the stage whenever she was on it, and the less familiar Dionyza and Tamora. She was a real repertory actress and could pass from these to show Ophelia in her madness, not with the startings and shriekings that some actresses affect, but really and miserably mad. Paulina was

one of her best parts. By the splendid way she let fly at Leontes she simply ran away with the first three acts. Her Portia was the best I have seen after those of the two great actresses already mentioned. Her manner in the casket scenes was well differentiated. She was more anxious over Morocco's choice than Aragon's. There was less fear of *his* choosing right. During Bassanio's casket speech she hid her face in her hands which was perhaps a natural thing to do in the circumstances. But Miss Thorndike, I remember, faced it out splendidly.

When I first noticed Mr. Wilfred Walter he was playing such parts as 'the Thane of Ross, which it will be recollected,' says Boswell sententiously, 'is a very inconsiderable character.' Thanks to the repertory system, which was then still in force to a large extent at the Vic, I saw him grow before my eyes into a first-rate actor. The night I saw him as Titus Andronicus is a memorable one to me. For I then completed my record of seeing on the stage all the thirty-seven plays of the Shakespearean Canon. It is of interest to me, if to no one else, to add that it had taken me nearly thirty-four years to do it. Skilfully produced by Mr. Atkins, with a nearly complete text (even the anachronism of 'popish ceremonies' was retained) and excellently acted, the play proved thoroughly enjoyable in spite of the horrors, which were by no means glossed over. The audience took them very well until near the end when they refused to take them seriously any longer. There was a

murmur of amusement when Titus overpowered Chiron and Demetrius with one arm, and at the end some of us fairly broke down and laughed when the deaths of Tamora, Titus, and Saturninus followed each other within about five seconds, as in a burlesque melodrama.

Mr. Walter's Titus was a grand performance. I can never forget his horrified glare at the vessel containing the heads of his sons when he realizes how he has been tricked. This scene is the climax of the play, and at the end of it Mr. Atkins, allowing himself for once a bit of embroidery, brought on Aaron to fill the vacant stage with peals of laughter. This was splendidly done by Mr. George Hayes who was excellent throughout, laying on the mixture of savagery and sardonic humour in strong, broad strokes as befitted the play.

In comedy I can pay Mr. Walter no higher compliment than to say that he was a better Falstaff in *Henry IV* than in the *Merry Wives*. For it means that he felt the intellectual greatness of the character and could make us feel it. The true Falstaff is greater in speech than in action. The stage Falstaff too often relies on the action, which is more prominent in the *Wives*, and so falls into clowning. Mr. Walter made his effects by speech and look.

Another actor who rose from minor to major parts was Mr. John Laurie. His Hamlet was more in the Benson than the Forbes Robertson tradition, a sharp rather than a sweet prince. In the nunnery scene he was more successful than any one I have

seen in showing, and making it seem natural that he should show, suspicion of Ophelia without anything to prompt it. Unfortunately Polonius peeped out from the arras as usual, and spoilt the effect which Mr. Laurie was making, and could have made without that bit of traditional but unnecessary staginess. His Macbeth was better still. He was barbaric, as Macbeth should be, but weak. His attempt to go back with the daggers was excellent, so was his nervousness while Lennox chatters about the weather; well done and not overdone. Mr. Laurie acts with brains and he has what Silas Wegg admired in his friend Mr. Venus, a speaking countenance.

I have already said that Mr. Hay Petrie is one of the two best Shakespearean clowns I have seen. His Costard is one of the memories at which I laugh whenever I recall them. In parts, like Launcelot Gobbo, you had to watch him all the time for at any moment he might come out with some unexpected piece of comicality, and even when he was doing nothing his silly-humorous expression made you laugh.

And then by a piece of inspired audacity Mr. Atkins cast him for Shylock. He did not revert to the comic pre-Macklin Jew, he was not grotesque, and it need not be said that he attempted nothing in the 'Major Prophet' style. He was not even a minimus prophet but just a shabby little Hebrew, and the skill was to make this insignificant figure tragic. He did it by acting all the time, driving home the character by look and

word and gesture. A slight foreign accent helped the general effect, but I was amused to hear Salanio when mocking him say 'mit' for 'with.' The common belief that Jews must speak English with a German accent is later than Shakespeare's time. There was no forcing up Shylock into a star part. Alone of all the Shylocks I had then seen he left the stage before the others in I. iii, and with no demonstration of hatred. Yet he had his great moments though he did not depend on them. One was his grovelling in the dust as Tubal enumerates Jessica's extravagances and springing up with new life at the mention of Antonio's losses. Another was his final exit with firm step and head erect, ignoring Tubal's proffered arm.

Some of my most vivid memories of those days I owe to Mr. Ernest Milton. In serious parts he acted with an imaginative intensity that came as near as anything in the modern theatre can to giving one 'the great thrill,' the moment that makes you catch your breath. Such a moment was his quiet final 'your houses' as Mercutio. He is the only actor I have seen who could make Banquo the most exciting character in *Macbeth* (though the other leading parts were quite competently played) by his keen watching of Macbeth in Act II and his quiet disdain scarcely veiled under formal respect in Act III. I have never been so sorry that a part was not longer. His Lear was the best I have seen since Irving. He did not—I don't think any one could—equal him in Act IV, but his storm scenes were on the heights of imagina-

tive acting. And he had the advantage, which Irving had not, of an uncut text.

Mr. Milton is also an admirable comedian. Despite his clever and amusing Autolycus and Parolles the palm here must go to his Armado with its fantastic dignity, amusing without exaggeration. And, as always, he spoke beautifully.

In my recollections of the season Miss Edith Evans spent at the Vic three parts stand out. As Cleopatra she tended to underplay the big scenes, indulging in no whirlwind of passion with the Messenger and not rising to the height of majesty at the close. But she really did suggest a good deal of the infinite variety, and her luxury of grief in Antony's absence was very skilfully shown. She has played Rosalind and Juliet's Nurse more recently at other theatres, so I will only say that in the former she appeared not a girl in breeches but the 'moonish youth' she calls herself. And when she was alone with Celia she was the charming, coaxing girl again, her interruptions seeming to burst out of her uncontrollably and almost unconsciously. To describe her Nurse I will for once borrow the words of a more eminent critic. 'Slow as a cart-horse, cunning as a badger, earthy as a potato,' it was one of the best pieces of Shakespearean acting of modern times.

Here let me interpose a word about another actress in the same part. Miss Martita Hunt has done nothing better than this brown, Italian peasant woman, grim, and almost sinister. I especially recall her taking Juliet on her knee at the

end of the ball scene, and her mournful, foreboding exit in the bedroom scene. A striking contrast this to Miss Evans's Gamp-like Nurse. Shakespearean acting like his Cleopatra has its infinite variety.

While talking of *Romeo and Juliet* I must devote a paragraph to my first visit to the new and glorified Old Vic in February, 1928. It was one of the most delightful evenings I have spent in the theatre, though I felt some sentimental regret for the old homely arrangements. The play was produced by Mr. Leigh with beauty and good taste without superfluous paraphernalia, though Mercutio was allowed the full length of his ropery. I have already mentioned Mr. Milton's best moment in the part. Miss Barbara Everest had just the right blend of vulgar humour, wickedness, and coarse tenderness for the Nurse, and came very near to the two described above. Best of all was the Juliet of Miss Jean Forbes Robertson with its grave, sweet beauty.

Another excellent Juliet of this period was Miss Adèle Dixon. She had the supreme merit of rising to her best at the most exacting moments. Among these was her hysterical reception of the Nurse's advice to marry Paris, changing to a strong, settled resolution, which (this was a good point) she kept up in the next scene with Paris himself, and in the repressed strength of the dialogue with the Friar.

Here, too, I may spare a few lines to say that Mr. Leigh gave me my only opportunity of seeing

the partially Shakespearean *Two Noble Kinsmen*. It was an interesting experiment, rightly given a gay Chaucerian setting, and if Swinburne had seen the delicate prettiness with which Miss Forbes Robertson handled the part of the Gaoler's Daughter he might not have written of it so harshly as he did.

Of such well-known actors as Messrs. John Gielgud and Ralph Richardson I need say little. The evening in 1930 on which I saw them in *Antony and Cleopatra* is another that ranks among my happiest memories. Mr. Gielgud's Antony was a splendid and shining performance. Mr. Richardson, as Enobarbus, gave the Cydnus speech naturally, not as a set piece. In the early scenes he was a gallant and sturdy figure (with eponymous brazen beard) and acted in that concatenation accordingly, and his changed demeanour after his desertion, when he appeared in Caesar's camp in civilian, almost penitential, garb was extraordinarily effective and affecting. Miss Dorothy Green was not afraid to make Cleopatra, if not elderly, at least verging on middle age and so was able to show her fascination more effectively than if she had been young and lovely. Beauty is skin deep, but this Cleopatra's power to charm lay deeper. The play was given almost at full length and was beautifully produced by Mr. Harcourt Williams who also doubled the Messenger and the Clown. Rather paradoxically he got a good deal of fun out of the former and made the latter eerie and sinister. In this, though I do not

forget that Weir played the part on comic lines, I think he was right. A modern audience is too tightly strung to want comic relief at this point. Where all were equal to their parts I must specially praise Miss Joan Harben for her skill in showing the timid courage of Iras in the final scene when she is at last brought face to face with realities.

If Mr. Harcourt Williams's production of *Julius Caesar* was less enjoyable it was so only because the play gave him less scope. The first time I saw it he himself played Brutus in a vein of sombre gentleness that exactly suited the character. Two years later Mr. Richardson was Brutus, the best I have seen since Lewis Waller and inferior to him only in the quarrel scene and in making a number of irritating little mistakes in his words. He was a Brutus very conscious of his philosophy and his integrity with a touch of donnish humour that accorded very well. Very good was the barely perceptible glance exchanged between him and Cassius when Casca tells them that the tribunes have been 'put to silence'; just enough to make the point and no more. Some actors at this moment start and strike attitudes like Garrick in *Hamlet*.¹ Talking of attitudes I may just refer to Mr. Williams's trick of making his crowds remain struck in Anglo-Saxon attitudes,

¹ 'When I asked him [Johnson] "Would not you, sir, start as Mr. Garrick does, if you saw a ghost?" He answered, "I hope not. If I did, I should frighten the ghost."' Boswell, *Tour to the Hebrides*, August 15, 1773.

silent and motionless, during the dialogue between the principals, instead of the usual realistic movement and apparent talking. This was appropriate and effective when the Clowns were under Puck's enchantment in the *Dream*, but it seemed unnatural to the crowd in the first Act of *Julius Caesar*.

As the younger Antony Mr. Gielgud's best moments were the sharp bark of laughter with which he greeted Cassius's offer of a share of the spoils, and that other more derisive laugh when Cassius reminds Brutus whose fault it is that Antony is still alive.

The Octavius was Mr. Richard Ainley, who at that time called himself Richard Riddle. It is a small part but he made the most of it, the embodiment of Meredith's 'wise youth,' calmly biding his time. I always looked to this actor for something interesting and he never disappointed me. His Claudio in *Much Ado* was the best I have seen. In the challenge scene he was grave and worried, not frivolous and jeering. I would not take my oath that this is what Shakespeare intended but it saves Claudio from becoming too unsympathetic for modern tastes. Another excellent sketch was his grim Salisbury in *King John*. Here the scene after John is crowned afresh was one of Mr. Williams's triumphs; the king trying in speech after speech to placate the nobles who stood round him in motionless and menacing hostility.

Mr. Richardson rightly made Falconbridge in

the early scenes not much more than a country lout who developed gradually into what he later becomes. Some actors make him turn miraculously into a *preux chevalier* the moment the king's sword touches his shoulder. By the way, he said 'A B C book,' presumably thinking the audience would not understand 'absey book,' but it is not really necessary to explain Shakespeare's archaisms from the stage. In the *Dream* he was too quiet and refined for the true 'bully Bottom,' but his wistful manner gave a new edge to his scenes with Titania. In these, instead of the usual ass's head he wore only the ears, and a donkey's muzzle on his chin. This gave opportunity for facial play, but I am not sure that it was a happy innovation, and apparently others share this opinion for it has not been repeated in later revivals.

To sum up: swift speaking, brisk playing, a full text, simple mounting, are things I had long desired on the Shakespearean stage, and now that I have got them I do not recant. But I will not deny that these good qualities may have their defects. I have heard a Gloster in *Richard III* deliver his first speech at such a rate that he had spoken eight or ten lines in the time that Irving or Benson would have taken over three or four. But he did it at the expense of almost entirely leaving out the significance of what he was saying. Similarly I have known a Shylock spoil his 'How like a fawning publican' speech by rushing through it headlong when a little pausing and emphasis would have produced its full effect. One

does not go to the theatre simply to hear Shakespeare's words with most of their meaning left out. Again, Weir and his colleagues made the opening dialogue of *Romeo* amusing by playing it deliberately. When it is rattled through at break-neck speed the audience scarcely realizes that it is meant to be funny.

In the revivals at the Old Vic during the period covered by this chapter any such defects were more than redeemed not only by the good qualities I have tried to indicate, but because these revivals set a new fashion in Shakespearean acting. Indeed it might be said they made Shakespeare fashionable once more. In 1895 William Archer lamented that a London playgoer was not permitted to see more than one or two of Shakespeare's plays in a year. Miss Baylis not only revived the whole thirty-seven but by severely limiting their runs allowed her faithful public to see half a dozen or more in every season. I need not repeat what I have said of the beneficial effects of this policy on the actors as well as on the audience.

It had another and a far-reaching effect. The methods of producing and acting Shakespeare initiated by Mr. Barker and made popular by Mr. Atkins were copied elsewhere, with the result that in recent years there have been many more Shakespearean revivals than there were before. My own records supply evidence of this. In thirty years, from 1890 to 1920, I saw not quite a hundred and fifty performances of thirty of Shakespeare's plays. In the twenty years from 1920 to

the present time I have seen over two hundred and fifty performances of the whole thirty-seven.

In 1933 Mr. Harcourt Williams retired from the office of producer at the Vic, and what I have called the golden age came to an end. Later revivals there will find their place elsewhere in this book.

CHAPTER VI

STRATFORD-ON-AVON

LIKE a good many other people I have seen Shakespeare's plays performed in three different theatres in his native town. First there was the old Memorial Theatre where for many years the Benson Company gave a short season each spring. There was a particular pleasure in seeing them act Shakespeare in those surroundings, with the chance, in addition of meeting Asche or Rodney or Benson himself in the street and tactfully trying not to stare; or of seeing, as I once saw, a lover and his lass by the banks of the Avon behaving very much as Shakespeare had described them three hundred years before.

The Stratford Festival of 1919 was the last to be directed by Sir Frank Benson. Since then it has been entrusted to an organization which, after being known as the 'Bridges-Adams' and the 'New Shakespeare' Company, eventually blossomed out as 'The Stratford-upon-Avon Festival Company.' For the sake of brevity I shall take the freedom to reduce this title to 'the Stratford Company.' And as it has played an important part in the history of the Shakespearean theatre during the past twenty years I devote a chapter to my reminiscences of its work.

When I first saw this Company at Stratford its leading man was Mr. Randle Ayrton, a very competent all-round Shakespearean actor, equally acceptable in such diverse parts as Shylock and Dogberry, Mercutio and Falstaff. This versatility he owes¹ mainly, no doubt, to his own talent, but partly also, I think, to the fact that, like several of his colleagues, he was once a Bensonian. As Mercutio he has a debonair grace joined with a swaggering vigour that saves him from being a mere dandy, and he does not spin out his death scene as some Mercutios do, nor force the pathos of it. His Dogberry is the best I have seen in its massive muddle-headedness. I never saw Weir in the part and Mr. Petrie, though deliciously droll, has not the bulk for it. I cannot imagine Dogberry as a small man.

Next to Mr. Ayrton came Mr. James Dale, another Bensonian, and an excellent Falconbridge, Benedick, and Macduff. He rose splendidly to Macduff's great opportunity at the end of IV. iii, working himself up in the preceding speeches so as to reach the proper height of fury in the last short one.

His Benedick, also, was one of the best of recent years. Any good comedian can do the early scenes well enough if he can resist the temptation to clowning. The real test of a Benedick begins in the church scene. Here I particularly liked Mr. Dale's 'Not for the wide world,' spoken quietly

¹ This paragraph was in type before Mr. Ayrton's death in May, 1940.

with a slight smile, as who should say, 'No ; I can't do that, even for you.' His contempt later on when the Prince and Claudio are chaffing him was well shown, and he did his love-making with the right blend of sincerity and self-mockery that such a man would feel.

He probably did not mean the audience to hear him say (in another scene) 'Damn that coughing.' But I heard it, and it helped me to understand how noise or movement in the audience may put the actors out, and perhaps account for some annoying slip or failure to bring out a point. On the stage he cannot go back and repeat a missed effect as he can in a film studio. Nor can he (though I have sometimes wished he would) shout at the spectators as a batsman can when they move behind the bowler's arm.

Something of this kind may have been responsible for an odd slip in the arbour scene when he said, 'Sits the *wind* in that corner?' as if rain or snow might be expected to sit in the corner but not wind. A more deliberate departure from the text was his 'Tell me more about this man Benedick' as he and Beatrice left the stage in the ball scene. This was one of the most amusingly audacious gags I have ever heard. And in spite of its modern phrasing it showed that he was entering into the spirit of the part. So, when Miss Thorndike played Emilia she interjected 'Where's my husband?' as she entered in the first Cyprus scene. This was a natural thing for Emilia to say in the circumstances, and cannot be classed with

the old-fashioned gags that were thrust in merely to raise a laugh. This newer kind of illustrative gag, as I may call it, does no harm if it is not overdone, and I don't know that it does much good except in showing that the players are taking an intelligent interest in their work. And I am prepared to take that for granted until the contrary appears.

To me the chief individual attraction of those last years of the old Memorial Theatre was Miss Florence Saunders. I wrote of this fine actress in the last chapter but, for a reason that will soon appear if the reader does not already know it, I must add something here. I was happy to see her magnificent Paulina again and to add her Julia in the seldom revived *Two Gentlemen* to my memories. Her silent acting while Proteus is serenading Sylvia was beautiful. In this play the brisk, self-conscious comicality of Mr. Laurie (another welcome accession from the Vic) as Speed made an admirable foil to the stolid, bucolic humour of Mr. Ayrton's Launce. But Crab should be a good-sized cur, not a tiny lapdog as he was here.

To modern taste the blot on this play is Valentine's gratuitous surrender of Sylvia in the last scene. At this point Sylvia buried her face in her hands and did not come to the surface again until Valentine calmly resumed possession of her some thirty lines later. As she has nothing to say at either point this was about the best thing she could do. But in a later revival the knot was

more simply cut by the omission of the two lines in which Valentine gives her up, and the scene ran with perfect smoothness without them. I note this as one of the most legitimate and intelligent omissions from Shakespeare's text that I have ever known.

I have good reason to remember a performance of *As You Like It* in 1925, for it turned out to be my last visit to the Old Memorial Theatre. The famous deer killed at Sir Thomas Lucy's Charlecote was duly brought on the stage, and, what was more important, the whole play was admirably acted—which is as I like it. Mr. Ayrton's Touchstone was an original and interesting interpretation, a melancholy creature of civilization unhappily plunged into a rustic existence and amusing himself as best he may with Corin and William, and by making perfunctory love to Audrey. Mr. Maurice Colbourne, another mainstay of the Company at this time, was, I think, the best Orlando I have seen. In the early Acts he resisted the temptation to make him a flapper's hero, but was a discontented, neglected boy with his native nobility just showing underneath. Later he acted as if lightly humouring a pretty youth while he is really thinking of his very Rosalind as of one absent. This was just right. Here I may interpolate that Mr. Colbourne was more successful than any actor in my experience in making a real and interesting character out of the rather unpromising part of Polixenes.

To return to *As You Like It*, Mr. Dale was a

really good Jaques. In contrast to the speech 'I met a fool i' the forest,' in which Jaques is talking to amuse and impress his friends, he gave the Seven Ages not as a set speech but as if thinking aloud. As he went on he seemed to forget the presence of the others altogether, and at the end turned his back and buried himself in a book. Nor did he spoil the effect by fussing over Adam a little later as I have seen Jaques do before now.

I had seen Miss Saunders's Rosalind more than once at the Vic. Like all she did it was beautiful and distinguished. I mention it now because the final words of the Epilogue, 'bid me farewell' had a sad appropriateness. They were the last words I heard her speak, and the last I heard from the stage of the old Memorial Theatre. Seven months later the actress was dead and the theatre a heap of ashes.

When a favourite actor dies in old age with all his triumphs behind him there is natural grief, but the untimely death of Florence Saunders at the age of thirty-five when she had already done great things and seemed to promise still greater, was indeed an insupportable and touching loss. She appeared to possess such splendid vitality that it was a shock to read, years later, in the biography of Miss Baylis, that she was crippled with arthritis, and only 'by ceaseless work and physical exercises had made out of her great disability a most unusual beauty of carriage and movement.'

The loss of the theatre was not insupportable. Externally it was by no means a thing of beauty,

and more than twenty-five years earlier I had been told that Lyall Swete had condemned the arrangements behind the scenes as 'antediluvian.' But it held happy associations and I could not but feel some regrets for its passing.

These regrets were quickly swallowed up in admiration for the energy and enterprise with which those responsible for the approaching Festival arranged to give the full programme of plays in a little cinema with a tiny stage. On this stage for six consecutive seasons this Company played Shakespearean repertory for the six months into which the Festival had now grown, and this in itself was a notable achievement. Like the Vic Company they suffered from frequent changes among the leading performers, but in spite of this handicap they maintained a reasonably high level of acting.

The other handicap, that of the small stage and presumably cramped accommodation behind it, was skilfully overcome. In the ball scene in *Romeo and Juliet*, for example, there was space for only one pair of dancers, and Paris and Juliet danced alone while the others looked on. But there was room for Capulet and Tybalt to have a wrestling match just afterwards which was very undignified and inappropriate.

During its first season in the cinema the Company presented a somewhat plume-plucked appearance, being without any of the players I have mentioned except Mr. Ayrton, who, to tell the truth, had sometimes to carry the whole play on

his back. And he was equal to the burden. His Falstaff in 2 *Henry IV* was one of the best I have seen. A laughing Falstaff is intolerable, but Mr. Ayrton had a roguish smile that was quite in character. His most striking moment was after his rejection by the king when he turned into a broken, quivering, old man and then made a pitiful attempt to recover his former buoyancy.

It was after this play that I heard one lady in the audience explaining to another that Henry ought not to have turned away Falstaff in public, 'he should have taken him aside and told him privately.' These overheard remarks are sometimes very amusing. Just before the curtain went up on *Hamlet* a man sitting in front of me asked his companion, 'What's the first scene?' I did not know that any apparently educated person did not know what is the first scene of *Hamlet*. And in Shakespeare's town, too! But when a lady near me, hearing the Fool repeatedly address Lear as 'nuncle,' said, 'Is that young man the king's nephew?' I suspected her of trying to pull the leg of any one who might be listening.

Later on the Stratford Company was strengthened by the return of Mr. Laurie and the accession of Mr. Wilfred Walter and others. Needless to say Mr. Walter's fine presence and organ voice were of immense value, and he always acts with brains. A good touch in his Macbeth was the look of apprehension when the Messenger said, 'I looked toward Birnam.' Macbeth knew that that was a dangerous point and showed alarm

before the moving of the wood was mentioned. In Miss Thorndike's revival of this play a new method of bringing in Banquo's Ghost had been introduced. Unknown to the audience he is seated, with his back to them, among the guests and at the appropriate moment turns a ghastly face on Macbeth. At Stratford this arrangement was further emphasized by making the guests on either side of him ostentatiously talk to each other in ignorance of his presence. I have remarked before on the tendency to elaborate a new piece of business.

I had admired Mr. Walter's Othello at the Vic, but at Stratford I liked it better still in spite of the shorter version. (In the cinema they made little attempt to give the plays in full. Their *Macbeth*, for example, lasted only two hours and twenty minutes, including two intervals). As Othello Mr. Walter, unlike Lewis Waller,¹ struck the key-note of a dominating nobility in his first words, and kept it up throughout the first two Acts, with a beautiful tenderness in the Senate Scene. In the first temptation scene his steady declension from cheerful confidence to misery was as skilful as anything I have seen him do, which is saying much. His final plunge into degradation at 'Set on thy wife to observe,' was marked by a slight pause of hesitation and horror as the thought struck him, before he could bring himself to utter it. From this moment the barbaric element was uppermost, whether in wild rage, fierce sarcasm,

¹ Above, p. 54.

or utter wretchedness, until the final return to tenderness in 'It is the cause.' Seldom, if ever, have I known the pity and terror of tragedy so penetrated and almost swallowed up by the beauty and skill of the interpretation.

Having analysed this fine performance at some length I must pass briefly over the other players. I have seen Miss Dorothy Green's Goneril four times, and as a grand piece of feminine wickedness I count it almost, if not quite, equal to anything Florence Saunders ever did. I am thinking especially of the intensity of her passion in the scene with Edmund, her rage when she is unmasked in Act V, her gloating over Regan's illness, and her final exit with drawn dagger. Even when she is not prominent in the action her facial play is always worth watching. More recently at the Vic Miss Green has played Paulina. In this part, too, she came near to Florence Saunders in her vigour and distinction, with a suggestion of humour kept well under control.

Two members of the Stratford Company who could always be relied on for good work were Mr. Kenneth Wicksteed and the late Roy Byford. Mr. Wicksteed, like Lyall Swete, put real character into his Polonius instead of letting the part play itself which is very easy to do. He let us see that as a politician Polonius was, like the younger Cecil, 'a man of small shifts.' When Laertes wants to return to France his saying 'Give him leave to go' with a snarl, as if he meant 'Let the young fool have his way,' was new to me and

quite in character. The Læertes in question, Mr. Eric Lee, was also original and intelligent. Instead of the usual *jeune premier* he was prosy and cunning, the true son of Polonius with the vigour of youth added. Another unconventional performance was the Prince Hal of Mr. Eric Maxon in 1 *Henry IV*. He was no madcap but played throughout in the spirit of his first soliloquy, the wise youth amusing himself in a cold sort of way with companions whom he means to cast off as soon as it suits him. An interesting experiment, but it made him rather a wet blanket in the Falstaff scenes, and would have been more appropriate to the Prince in Part 2.

There was nothing unconventional about Mr. Byford. Like Weir he was a fruity low comedian of the old school and played the Gravedigger in that style, which I think is the best for it. As Sly he was acting all the time he was watching the play, and his comments, some of them his own or the producer's, and interpositions in the action were gloriously funny. This was later on, in the new theatre. In the cinema one of his best parts was Casca, in which he looked strikingly like the late Lord Haldane and made the description of the crown-offering genuinely amusing. As Friar Laurence he showed himself a true artist by dropping his comic manner and playing the part in a calm, level style that made him, as he should be, the true point of rest in the tragedy.

I think it was on this occasion that Romeo made an odd slip in saying,

O that I were a glove upon that hand
That I might clutch that cheek,

whereas Shakespeare had written 'touch.' It is more to the purpose that Miss Joyce Bland was a first-rate Juliet. From the innocence and charm of the first scenes she rose into true passion as the play went on, and showed how foolish is the old saying that an actress cannot fill the character until she is too old to look it. In Act IV her alternation of the frozen numbness of misery with bursts of hysteria was excellently done, and so was her horror of the Nurse not only at the advice to marry Paris but whenever after that moment the two were in contact.

In *Richard III* it was an unnecessary innovation that in the scene in which Richard is represented as coming from his coronation Anne was brought onto the stage as his Queen, only to be pushed off again at once because there was nothing for her to do or say.

The last play I saw in the little cinema was the *Shrew*, and it made a very jolly wind-up to the many pleasant hours I had spent there. The Induction was omitted, probably because the small stage afforded no suitable vantage point for Sly as onlooker. Petruchio was a jolly rudesby with no nonsense about him. Katherine raved and stamped in approved style, and the rest gambolled round them in a high-spirited manner to the great enjoyment both of the audience and themselves. Mr. Wicksteed was, as usual, one of the best with a delightfully quaint Biondello, and Mr. Byford's

suave Baptista was as near to a point of rest as could be expected in a riot.

By this time the monstrous erection on the bank of the Avon known as the new Memorial Theatre was nearing completion. Whatever may be thought of its external appearance it is an extremely agreeable theatre for the spectator, and for the production of the plays it has many advantages over its two predecessors. The apron stage, the large main stage behind it, and the various devices for producing scenic effects are excellent things if judiciously used. But their presence may also tempt the over-ingenuous producer to rely on them too much, and I have seen productions in this theatre which must be included in the chapter headed 'Eccentricities.' Here I confine myself to performances on more traditional lines.

I have seen *Troilus and Cressida* dressed in three different styles, in conventional classic costume, in Elizabethan, and in modern dress; and I have no hesitation in saying that the second of these styles, adopted at Stratford, suited it best. In their rich and pleasing costumes the Greeks and Trojans suggested the soldiers of Elizabeth and Philip playing with stately courtesy the game of war in the Netherlands. And with amusing and laudable consistency Helenus and Calchas were got up as Elizabethan clergymen.

Moreover, the play was very well acted all round. Mr. Ayrton's Pandarus was one of the best things he has ever done, deliciously comic in his silly fussiness. Whenever he was on the stage

I was, like Duncan, in unusual pleasure. Mr. Dale did the rough, snarling humour of Thersites with such skill that he prevented his continual railing from becoming tedious. Mr. Glenville's Hector in the public-schoolboy style contrasted well with the luxurious arrogance of Mr. Wooland's Achilles. So did the blunt, manly Aeneas of Mr. Dennis Roberts, with the hard-bitten Ulysses of Mr. Donald Wolfit. Speaking of Mr. Roberts I recall his very interesting performance of Lear's Fool in a revival at the Q Theatre. He made him a middle-aged man, hump-backed but by no means weak-witted, shrewd, rather, and serious.

Another old Bensonian whom I was surprised and pleased to find again after a long interval was Mr. Gerald Kay Souper. I had seen him in the O.U.D.S. in my undergraduate days and then with Benson, after which he disappeared from my ken until he turned up in the Stratford Company. In Friar Laurence and Agamemnon his good style and skill in speaking the verse (I need not point the moral) were of real value to the plays; and as the Duke in the *Merchant* he earned a good mark for his comical amazement when Portia springs her mine.

I have seen *All's Well* twice,¹ and though it was competently acted both times, I found it dull. I conclude that it is not a good acting play. And this in spite of the fact that Mr. Neil Porter played the King and Mr. Stanley Howlett Lafeu

¹ A third revival in the autumn of 1940 falls outside the fifty years which are the subject of this book.

with a distinction that made it a pleasure to watch them. Mr. Howlett made it clear that Lafeu, though a humorous old gentleman (humorous in both the Elizabethan and the modern senses of the word) *was* a gentleman and not a buffoon. But the high light of the performance was Miss Rosamund Merivale in the small part of Diana. In the last scene Diana is mistress of the situation, and Miss Merivale seized her opportunity with both hands.

The Clown in this play is really rather a bore, and Mr. Wicksteed rubbed this in by giving, in a dry, sententious manner, a life-like portrait of a professional funny man who is not very successful in his profession.

He had better opportunities as Williams in *Henry V*, and used them in an original and quite legitimate rendering of the part. Instead of the 'blunt humour' and general air of manly distinction that usually accompany it he gave us a realistic sketch of a rough unskilled labourer turned soldier. This and the natural force and humour of Mr. Howlett's Bates made the night scene a real triumph, though Mr. McCallin played the King in rather too light a style for me with my memories of Benson and Waller. By the way, he was the only King Henry I have seen since Benson to show that he has ever heard of Bardolph before, when Fluellen speaks of him. To complete my memories of this enjoyable performance Mr. Baliol Holloway was the best Pistol since Oscar Asche. Mr. Roberts made his jovial Gower a real

character instead of the usual stick ; thus proving that Shakespeare always gives opportunities, even in parts that at first sight seem unpromising, if only the actor will take them. And Mr. Eric Maxon was the only French King in my experience to suggest in the last scene that he resents the conquest of his country and the calm way in which the conqueror arranges things for him. A novel ending to this scene was that the words 'God speak this Amen' were followed by a kind of elaborate Sevenfold Amen sung by the full strength of the Company at the full strength of their lungs.

Finally Mr. Wolfit spoke the Choruses to admiration, though I could have done with a little more action ; his arms were too firmly glued to his sides. When Miss Gwen Frangcon-Davies declaimed them with splendid vigour at Drury Lane in 1938 she went to the other extreme, which in rhetorical speeches is a fault on the right side. But at the word 'hour-glass' to trace the outline of one in the air was perhaps to overdo the principle of suiting the action to the word.

Having mentioned this revival I may extend the digression to say that it was mounted with that colourful splendour which, as I have remarked elsewhere, is not out of place in such a play as *Henry V*. Some of the stage-pictures even provoked bursts of applause, a thing that seldom happens nowadays. The Southampton scene recalled Waller's, with the additional tit-bit of realism that we were allowed to see the ship bearing Henry and his staff actually moving from the

quayside. Now that the new methods of mounting the plays are so firmly established and there is no serious danger of a reversion to those of Daly and Tree, I may confess that I have enough of the old Adam in me to enjoy an occasional outbreak of magnificence. At present the real danger to the faithful interpretation of the plays comes from another quarter, which I shall indicate later.

It is now time to return to Stratford. In Benson's time the two or three weeks of the annual Festival were only an incident, though an important one, in his life's work of making Shakespeare's plays known and enjoyed over the whole country. By making Stratford their headquarters and extending the season there to six months in each year this Company has continued his work on different lines. Instead of taking Shakespeare to many places they have induced the people of many places to come and see Shakespeare acted in his own town. The full hotels and the rows of cars and motor-coaches drawn up outside the theatre bear eloquent testimony to their success. They have made Stratford for the first time in history a centre of the first importance, not merely for tourists who want to gape at 'the Birthplace,' but for those who believe that Shakespeare is most truly honoured by the intelligent production and capable acting of his plays.

CHAPTER VII

ECCENTRICITIES

FOR the greater part of the last fifty years two different methods of presenting Shakespeare's plays have held the stage. They might be distinguished as Shakespeare illustrated and Shakespeare interpreted. This puts it too broadly. There was much faithful interpretation by the actors in the old style, and sufficient illustration by means of stage setting in the new. Nevertheless the phrase will serve to indicate the two styles. And all the productions I have hitherto mentioned have approximated towards one or other of them, while some, such as Irving's and Benson's, have combined both.

In recent years a third method has grown up. Having no desire to return to the worn-out style of sheer unsophisticated magnificence, and being dissatisfied with the straightforward simplicity of the new, producers began to look round for something fresh. This was not at first a mere desire for novelty for its own sake. There seems to have been an impression that audiences were becoming too familiar with the accepted manner of playing Shakespeare, were taking him too much for granted, and so were missing his full value and

meaning. They wanted shaking up. They had got into a rut and must be jolted out of it. And this could best be done by presenting the plays in some unfamiliar way which would compel the audience to take fresh notice of them.

The first method of doing this which presented itself was to act them in modern dress. This, it was thought, would help the spectators to realize that the characters were real people like themselves, doing real things, instead of the conventional figures that, it was assumed, they had hitherto supposed them. Now, the characters in, say, *Hamlet* may be dressed in various ways. Charles Kean would spend immense pains in finding out what were the actual costumes of eleventh-century Denmark and in reproducing them as closely as convention would allow. The recent custom has been to give them costumes more or less of the Renaissance. Or they may wear Elizabethan dress so that they appear to us as Shakespeare meant them to appear to playgoers of his own time. And here the modern dress producer thinks he scores a point. Yes, he says, Shakespeare intended his audience to see men and women in the familiar dress of their own day, and that is just what I am letting *you* see. There is some truth in this, but, I think, more fallacy; at least if the methods adopted are those of Sir Barry Jackson's *Hamlet* produced at the Kingsway Theatre in 1925. Eminent persons, I know, stated that they had discovered 'new points in Hamlet's soul' from watching this production. To my thinking it was

so covered with a blaze of modernity that it was difficult to see anything else. Cigarettes, pocket-lighters, wrist-watches, were always being flourished at us. Here four supers were playing bridge, there some one was mixing a whiskey and soda, then a car was heard outside, and all these things by their very novelty on the Shakespearean stage distracted our attention even more effectively than Tree's rabbits.¹

The producer's problem, then, was to make the play fit into this setting. Clearly certain obstinate lines had to be cut. 'He wore his beaver up' could not be said of a ghost in modern uniform, and Hamlet's hysterical outburst after the Play Scene was omitted as not being the kind of behaviour one would expect of a prince in a dinner jacket. His description of his father as having—

Hyperion's curls, the front of Jove himself,

and so on, was also left out, presumably for the same reason. But this policy could not be carried very far or there would be nothing left. The upshot was that no profusion of pocket-lighters could conceal the fact that people in modern dress do not talk and act as these people were talking and acting.

The only character to gain anything by the change from the usual methods was Polonius. Mr. Bromley-Davenport was more convincing as a suave and wily politician than a Polonius in robes usually is. Mr. Frank Vosper, too, was successful

¹ See p. 47.

in turning the barbaric Claudius into a polished modern royalty. It was significant that for his prayer scene he wore a dressing-gown, presumably thinking that he could express the passion of it more effectively if he covered up his dress trousers.

Sir Barry Jackson's *Macbeth* was more successful because the modernities were not thrust down our throats with the same vehemence. Yet one could not help being aware of them, and they were nearly always at odds with the words and the action; as for instance when a general in khaki with a chestful of medal-ribbons ordered trumpets to sound and called them 'clamorous harbingers of blood and death.' Some attempts were made to avoid incongruity by making the lower-class character talk Scotch: 'brave Macbaith, weel he desairves that name.' And Macbeth himself spoke of 'this *blasted* heath' as if the adjective were an expletive.

Occasionally, I admit, the modern setting helped to bring out a point. It gave a more vivid impression of Macbeth's charmed life when they blazed away at him with revolvers at close range than when they merely poke at him with property swords. But in spite of a few such moments the general effect was that one was more interested in the modern setting than in the play. It was one of the drawbacks to the old style of production that the scenery and stage effects were apt to draw attention away from the actors. But now that we had got rid of one distraction it seemed a mistake to interpose another.

Possibly something of this kind occurred to Sir Barry Jackson. For in his next production, the *Shrew*, no attempt to illustrate Shakespeare by the modern trappings could be discerned. It was a sheer burlesque, the joke lying in the incongruity between the Elizabethan story and diction, and the modern costumes and business, the motor car, the flashlight photograph of the wedding group, the electric stove produced when Grunio complains of the cold; the jokes of the old *Comic History of England* when it represented William the Conqueror landing from a Channel steamer. And regarded simply as a burlesque it was amusing enough.

When Oscar Asche produced the *Merry Wives* in this style in 1929 he carried the same procedure further towards its logical conclusion by modernizing the language as well as the setting. Mistress Anne became Miss Anne, her parents Mr. and Mrs. Page, and her dowry of £700 rose to £7,000. Falstaff called for a jorum of rum in place of a pottle of sack, talked of 'Piccadilly at closing time' instead of 'Bucklersbury at simple time' and shouted 'taxi' whenever he left the stage. It accorded well with this kind of dialogue that Mrs. Page should give her instructions to Mrs. Quickly by telephone, that the duel should be a bout of fisticuffs, and that Pistol's rant, which could not easily be modernized, should be justified by ingeniously representing him as a broken-down actor.

On its own lines it was capitally acted. Oscar Asche cleverly distinguished Falstaff as a raffish

old sportsman from the Falstaff of Shakespeare, and Mr. Petrie's Evans was a triumph. A little, shabby, shaggy Welsh parson, with greyish hair and moustache, and speckled straw hat, he really did modernize the character. But in spite of these and other good pieces of acting the performance was no more than a curiosity. It threw no new light on the play, and was useful only in showing that Shakespeare cannot in any literal sense be modernized.

So when a lady sitting by me said, 'I should like to see all Shakespeare's plays in modern dress,' I hesitated to agree with her. In fact I have seen seven of them. I pass over the *Merchant*, merely observing that the procedure in the trial when set in the surroundings and costumes of a modern court of justice was the greatest incongruity of all, and come to two recent productions in which the modern setting has been employed not to illustrate Shakespeare but to show how his plays may illustrate modern political developments.

In *Troilus and Cressida*, in 1938, the Trojans were in khaki and the Greeks in German uniform; and the acting was in that concatenation accordingly. A year later *Julius Caesar* was transposed into a conflict between democracy and the modern brand of dictatorship. These were, to my mind, more legitimate uses of modern dress than those which I have previously described. Even so the chief interest lay in observing the ingenuity with which the producers would bring in such adjuncts as a cocktail party or morning tea. Nor can I

overcome my objection to hearing, for example, officers talking of 'my sword' and 'my armour' when they are wearing khaki and carrying no weapons but revolvers. And that the rival commanders in *Julius Caesar* should exchange their defiance by telephone was even more far-fetched than the device by which Tree attempted to make that scene plausible.¹

Both plays were well acted. Shakespeare's Pandarus could not be more skilfully transposed into the modern key than by Mr. Max Adrian's affected, elderly roué and society butterfly. Mr. Walter Hudd's smiling old gentleman, nervously anxious to conciliate everybody, may have been very unlike a real dictator, but was the exact modern counterpart of Shakespeare's neurotic Caesar. Best of all, I thought, was Mr. Antony Hawtrey's Casca. One critic described him as a kind of Bertie Wooster, but this was to mistake the actor's intention. He adopted a pose of blasé boredom to conceal his disgust at having to submit to the dictatorship, and this was exactly Casca interpreted in a modern style.

The sum of all is that modern dress detracts more from the interest and value of a performance of Shakespeare than it adds to them. Mr. Granville Barker has said that it is when a play has no hold on us that we fall to thinking about the scenery, and that is equally true of the dresses. If the actors are doing their work properly we should not notice the costumes or the properties at all,

¹ pp. 70-71 above.

except when they play a prominent part in the action, because our attention would be fixed on the story and the characters. And in Shakespeare this end is best attained when the actors are either in the traditional costumes to which we are accustomed or in Elizabethan dress which accords with the words and the action.

If the modern dress producers relied too much on prosaic realism those who adopt what is called stylized production eschew realism altogether. For an example in this kind I may take Mr. Anmer Hall's *Love's Labour's Lost*, produced by Mr. Tyrone Guthrie at the Westminster Theatre in 1932. There was only one scene, with the King's pavilion draped in red on one side and the Princess's in green on the other, each group of characters dressed in the corresponding colour and keeping strictly to its own side in all entrances and exits. The story was told as a ballet or masque rather than a play, the low comedy characters supplying the antimasque. The method was not inappropriate to this artificial comedy and produced on the whole a pleasant effect of light and charming gaiety.

Nor is it altogether out of place in *Twelfth Night*, which I have seen produced in this manner several times in recent years, though I much prefer that comedy played 'straight.' The eaves-dropping scene is not improved by placing the listeners in a bathing tent with holes through which they protrude their heads; nor by turning the solemn Malvolio into a brisk, capering dandy.

In one such production at the Vic Miss Jessica Tandy doubled Viola and Sebastian. I had never seen this before though I know it has been done in the past. It makes the story more plausible, but mars the effect of the last scene when a mute double has to be brought in.

But producers who are determined to 'ginger up' Shakespeare have not been content with stylized production. The next stage is fantastification. One of the earliest examples of this to come my way was *The Merchant of Venice* by the Russian producer M. Komisarjevsky at Stratford in 1933. Lancelot, made up as a pantomime clown, and taking a much more prominent share in the action than the text allows, played something like the part of the Vice in mediaeval drama. Morocco was a nigger minstrel in appearance and turned the rhetoric of his speeches into burlesque. The principal scene was a fantastic medley of Venetian architecture in which was set an appropriately fantastic Shylock cleverly played by Mr. George Hayes, and finally Miss Fabia Drake was a charming light comedy Portia who took neither the ordeal of the caskets nor the trial seriously.

When I think of the Shylocks and Portias I have seen I cannot doubt that the traditional style that gave them their opportunities is the right one for this play, but as an occasional joke this fantastic method is not amiss. And it came off better still in Komisarjevsky's *Comedy of Errors*. I can best express what I thought of this by saying that at the end of it I felt, what I very seldom feel

nowadays, that I should have liked then and there to see it all over again. The play is a farce; its purpose, therefore, is to rouse uproarious laughter, and this the producer did by extravagant but legitimate methods. The fun began, as the phrase is, from the word 'go'; the crowd guying Aegeon's exposition by their ridiculous business and interjections—interjections of laughing in a different sense from Benedick's. And this kind of thing was kept up all through. It was a triumph of teamwork rather than of individual acting, but there must be a word of praise for Miss Peggy Livesey as the Courtesan. Her 'Oh well!' interjected into the speech of the Abbess, deservedly brought down the house. It was characteristic, by the way, that the Abbess's habit was—of all colours—pink. The costumes, indeed, were a feature of the production. They were of no particular time or place but made a delightful medley of colour and so were in keeping with the irresponsible gaiety of the whole performance.

The *Errors* is the only play of Shakespeare's, in my experience, to be improved by eccentric production. It might be expected that the *Shrew*, being equally farcical, would profit by similar treatment, but Komisarjevsky's production of it at Stratford showed that it does not. The reason, I think, is that on its own merits it is a more amusing farce than the *Errors*. And the fun of it is best brought out by playing it straightforwardly without fantastical embroidery. At Stratford Mr. Alec Clunes acted Petruchio with splendid humour and

force, and the eccentricities of the production merely got in his way and hampered his genuine interpretation of the character.

I saw a more amusing fantastication of the play at the Vic when the Bianca story was given in the style of the Italian Commedia dell'Arte, with Grumio as Clown, Gremio as Pantaloon, and Tranio as Harlequin. In this part Mr. Richard Riddle was the success of the performance. With mask, parti-coloured dress, and lath sword he was the complete 'roguish servant' Harlequin, and his brisk, light-heeled manner of playing fitted wonderfully well into the story. The others were in the same style of sprightly capering and posing; nothing realistic, but all very pleasant and amusing.

Yet another attempt to improve on the traditional manner of acting the *Shrew* was made at the New Theatre in 1937, with such additions as a very amusing pantomime horse, ballets, and a wordless scene of Petruchio and his servants dressing up as ghosts to frighten Katherine. Amid all this revelry the acting almost slipped out of sight, but that excellent Irish comedian, Mr. Arthur Sinclair, was a capital Sly. I have known Sly watch the play from various points of vantage; from a box, from the orchestra, from the apron stage, and from an Elizabethan upper stage. Now the whole play was acted in the Lord's bedroom, and Sly saw it from his bed, as he also did in Komisarjevsky's production. But, not content with being a by no means inactive spectator, Mr.

Sinclair at one point 'stepped in among the players,' as Sir Thomas More once did, and took the part of the Pedant himself. The point of this eluded me unless it were to add one more eccentric novelty.

So far my examples of fantasticating Shakespeare in this way have been taken from comedy and farce. And if, except in one instance, they have brought no improvement, they have been comparatively harmless. But when such methods are applied to the tragedies there is a different story to tell. On the whole I think M. Komisarjevsky's *Macbeth* was the least enjoyable Shakespearean performance I have seen. Apparently his design was to remove all colour and poetry from the play, leaving everything stark and drab. The scenes were mostly composed of masses of aluminium with funnels sticking up here and there, and most of the dresses were of a dull dark green. The supernatural element was entirely eliminated. What Macbeth took for Banquo's Ghost was really his own shadow on the wall. The Witches were old hags who were discovered plundering the slain after the battle, and told the fortunes of Banquo and Macbeth by palmistry. This would have had a comic effect in a farce, here it merely vulgarized the tragedy. The Cavern Scene was not shown on the stage at all. After the banquet Macbeth lay down on a couch and had a nightmare in which he heard some of the speeches in that scene spoken 'off.' When Mr. Atkins at the Vic showed the Hecate scene as a vision of

Macbeth's it was effective because Macbeth does not take part in that scene. Here the same idea was inappropriately applied to a more important scene and spoilt it.

In comparison with this M. Komisarjevsky's *King Lear* might be accounted a success. It was played without change of scene on a huge flight of steps occupying the whole stage, which successfully gave the impression of a single titanic action. But strange tricks were played with the dialogue. M. Komisarjevsky apparently thinks himself free to transfer speeches from one character to another or to divide a single speech among several speakers. In the *Shrew* he even invented a new character, Baptista's servant, and gave him some of Biondello's lines. Another innovation in *Lear* was to introduce into Act I part of the dialogue between Edmund and Goneril in Act IV. This is not to interpret Shakespeare but to try to improve him.

In *Macbeth* a good set of players were apparently so bewildered by the oddities of the production that they gave a very poor performance. In *Lear* the production was less bizarre and the cast successfully fitted themselves into it, though in both plays they suffered from too frequent lapses of memory. Mr. Ayrton and Mr. Wolfitt were good and sound as Lear and Kent. Mr. Dale rightly made Edmund manly and attractive in his villainy, the kind of man the wicked sisters would naturally fall in love with; and I liked the way Miss Rosalind Iden as Cordelia stood up to Lear in Act I and gave him as she got.

But it was in *Antony and Cleopatra* at the New Theatre in 1936 that M. Komisarjevsky's methods reached their climax. His liberties with the text in transposing scenes and rearranging the dialogue were not needed to save scene-shifting as the former sometimes were in the old days, so it is to be supposed that he thinks his arrangements better than Shakespeare's. For example, instead of beginning with 'Nay but this dotage,' which is the best opening the play could possibly have, he started with the trifling dialogue of the Soothsayer and the girls from the second scene. In IV. iii he gave some of the speeches of the soldiers to the Soothsayer who has no business to be there at all. Still more ridiculously, when Octavius apostrophizes the absent Antony, 'Leave thy lascivious wassails,' he actually brought Antony onto the stage so that Octavius was made to deliver the lines straight at him. This had an absurdly incongruous effect.

The experiment of allowing a Russian actress to play Cleopatra in broken English was dealt with faithfully by the critics at the time, and I need say no more of it. But there were three pieces of acting which went a long way to redeem the freaks of the production. Mr. Leon Quartermaine's style is rather light for Enobarbus, but he interpreted the humour of the character admirably and spoke beautifully, as he always does. Mr. Laurence Anderson made Menas a humorous *sans-culotte* fishing in troubled waters. Best of all was Miss Margaret Rawlings as Charmian. Her delivery

of her speeches, some ten lines in all, after Cleopatra's death, was worth all the rest of the performance put together.

For the sake of these three and of seeing how far the fantastication of Shakespeare can be carried I am glad I saw the revival, though it ran for less than a week.

I now turn to some recent productions which in comparison with those just described seem almost normal though they would have been thought extravagant twenty years ago or less. In Chapter V I brought my reminiscences of the Old Vic down to 1933. In that year Mr. Tyrone Guthrie succeeded Mr. Harcourt Williams as producer. I had seen samples of his work in the *Love's Labour's Lost* already described, and in *Richard II*, at Stratford. Allowance being made for a certain amount of modern oddity, such as placing the deposition scene on a flight of steps, this was an excellent production full of brilliant colouring; the colouring, as is usual in productions of this kind, being on the costumes rather than the scenery, and the scenery itself suggestive rather than realistic. One feature, well conceived and well executed, was the contrast of the conspirators against Richard, stern and sinister men, with their opposite numbers the fribbles. The best of these was Mr. Stanley Howlett as Bagot. I shall not forget the sense of approaching doom which he put into the simple words, 'I fear me, never,' at the end of II.ii. But the climax of the Coventry scene was bungled. The combatants were ludicrously preparing to fight on

foot with huge lances when the king fortunately intervened. On the night I saw the play one of the actors made the most comprehensive slip in his words I have ever observed. After giving a speech of some half-dozen lines in its proper place he repeated it at a later point to the confusion of the others on the stage.

This production gave me good hopes of Mr. Guthrie's work at the Vic. But some of his revivals there allayed the good precedence. His *Twelfth Night* was stylized, but not objectionably, and his *Macbeth* a great improvement on M. Komisarjevsky's. It is a real boon that we have escaped so completely from the tyranny of realistic painted scenes that Banquo's murder could be played continuously with the scenes that precede and follow it without even the dropping of a curtain to indicate a change of place. Similarly the whole of Act V was played straight on, the appearance of one or other group of characters being sufficient to tell us that we were now within now without the castle. This was an admirable reversion to Elizabethan methods. But it was a mistake to omit the whole of the Witches' first scene and the first thirty-five lines of their second. A note on the programme told us that there was 'overwhelming evidence against the authenticity' of these passages, a statement I take leave to contradict flatly. The apparitions in IV.i were not seen and the caldron became a small kettle which certainly could not have held all the ingredients the Witches spoke of putting into it.

The leading man at this time was Mr. Charles Laughton, an intellectual rather than an imaginative Angelo and Macbeth. The suggestions of insanity in the last Act of *Macbeth* were skilfully conveyed and, like all he did, interesting; for example, in his confidential, almost affectionate, manner with the Birnam Wood Messenger. But I cannot altogether approve a Macbeth with the poetry left out. His Henry VIII was a great draw because he had recently appeared as that king in a film. Being *parcus cultor et infrequens* of that form of entertainment I have not seen it, but he certainly represented the Henry of the play magnificently, and brought out the humour without clowning it as some actors do. But even in his Tudor rage he should not have said 'what appetite yer have.' The leading actress seemed to confound Katharine of Aragon with her namesake of Padua. She was far too shrewish.

Miss Athene Seyler, whose richly comical Mistress Overdone was the best of the riff-raff of Vienna in *Measure for Measure*, was also a jolly, rollicking Maria in *Twelfth Night*, but like many actresses in this part she overdid her giggling. Similarly the Viola must needs bid for a laugh at

I am all the sisters of my father's house,
And all the brothers too,

when in fact Viola is thinking of Sebastian whom she believes drowned.

In Mr. Guthrie's later productions at the Vic the eccentricity was more marked. *Measure for*

Measure was played in a single scene without change of any kind which was well enough. But the scene itself was the most 'architectooralooral' I have ever seen, all arches, stairs, and galleries. Angelo by a presumably intentional pun had a very angelic appearance with golden hair, innocent face, and light-coloured robes. Mr. Jay Laurier as Pompey was extraordinarily funny, though he gagged a good deal and introduced too much irrelevant business. When I saw him as Launce at Stratford some months later he threw over the character altogether and abounded in his own sense. Yet when he can restrain himself and be content to speak and act what is set down for him he is perhaps the best Shakespearean clown that has appeared since Mr. Petrie.

When Mr. Michel St. Denis produced *Macbeth* at the Vic the stage was again cluttered up with staircases and jutties which merely impeded the action, and the Witches wore grotesque masks and scaly costumes suggestive of sea-monsters. But the *Macbeth* of Mr. Laurence Olivier made amends for much. He has a good voice and uses it well except that he is apt to shout too much and too loudly. His thoughtful delivery of the speeches in which he turns over in his mind the idea of the murder was first-rate. In the last Act a certain amount of sardonic humour is not amiss, nor was his kicking the 'whey-faced' Messenger. *Macbeth* has now completely lost self-control. But his picking up the Birnam one and carrying him off the stage was absurd.

In 1938 Mr. Guthrie dressed the characters of *Midsummer Night's Dream* in a medley of pseudo-classical and early Victorian costumes. As I have already said, this kind of thing adds nothing to our enjoyment or comprehension of the play. It is all very well to avoid convention, but some producers have now passed beyond that possibly laudable ambition to the stage of hunting after originality for its own sake, and trying to surprise us by doing something that no one has thought of before. Mr. Gielgud has told us that Miss Baylis, who certainly knew as well as any one in recent times how to get the best out of Shakespeare, remarked, 'I do like my fairies to be gauzy.' In the same spirit I may say that I do like my stage battles to be realistic, as we may infer from the Chorus to *Henry V* that Shakespeare also did, and not transformed into ballets of posturing supers.

It is true that audiences sometimes appear to enjoy the things I have been describing. I have also known them applaud heartily when *Twelfth Night* is acted in knockabout style. The pleasure produced by such means is not the right or the best kind of pleasure that the plays can give. This supports what I have said before, that many people who go to the theatre nowadays have not learnt how Shakespeare ought to be played. Mr. Atkins and others have tried to teach them, but their efforts have not yet produced a public capable of appreciating them. The Lyceum *Twelfth Night* was before my time but I am prepared to wager a considerable sum that the

kitchen scene and the duel were not allowed to become pantomime rallies when Irving and Ellen Terry were the principal figures in them.

Nor would Borachio in *Much Ado* have been permitted to talk consistently of Hero's 'winder,' as I have known him do in a recent production. Possibly this was intended to represent the speech of a low-class character. If so it was a misplaced piece of realism like that which sometimes makes Bardolph and Mrs. Quickly talk like modern cockneys. Similarly I have heard an actor in the part of Bottom try to make up for his lack of humour by an intermittent Loamshire accent.

In one revival of *Much Ado* at the Vic there were a number of merely wilful and therefore annoying eccentricities. One of the worst was that Don Pedro was made to sing 'Sigh no more' at the bidding of Leonato which involved tampering with the dialogue for no better reason than that Don Pedro was, I suppose, the star singer of the cast. At any rate it gives me the opportunity of saying that Leonato was played, and very well played, by an excellent actor with a very pleasant voice, Mr. Cecil Trouncer. He made a real character out of a part that is too often represented as merely a stage bore.

I criticize these aberrations, I hope not too harshly, because they occur in the work of producers whose professed intention is to interpret Shakespeare more faithfully than their predecessors. No such intention could be attributed to those responsible for *In Such a World*, a modern-

ized version of the *Comedy of Errors* which was produced in London in 1935. Three important characters, the Duke, Aegeon, and the Abbess, were omitted altogether, and the original dialogue was interspersed with new speeches such as that in which the Courtesan described herself as 'the daughter of a clergyman.' The total effect of the medley on a modern spectator was not unlike that which the Restoration and eighteenth century versions of the comedies may have produced on the audiences for whose tastes they were designed. It was not intended to interpret Shakespeare and therefore cannot be blamed for not doing so.

I return to the eccentricities which are the proper subject of this chapter. Sometimes they are transferred from the method of production to the acting itself. We have had Richard III presented as a grotesque guttersnipe which is about the last thing a Plantagenet would be. In the same play at the reference to Elizabeth in the last scene she has been known to appear on the stage smiling rather self-consciously, as if she had been hanging about during the battle in readiness to hand herself over to the winner.

Odder still was the attempt to present *Henry V* as a pacifist tract. The Archbishop became an unprincipled cleric driving a well-meaning young man into a course which his conscience disapproved. Benson spiritualized Henry, it was left to Mr. Guthrie and Mr. Laurence Olivier between them to try to intellectualize him. In the first scene he was prowling about the stage trying

to make up his mind about the war, and all along thoughtfulness kept breaking in, whereas what the play calls for is straightforward, dashing rhetoric, and no nonsense about the ethics of war. When Fluellen says, 'As long as your majesty is an honest man,' Henry replied, 'God keep me so,' in a low, anxious tone. Whether this or Waller's hearty, cheerful style accords better with Shakespeare's King Henry is a question which the reader may determine for himself.

If I include among eccentricities certain experiments in acting Shakespeare without scenery and with a minimum of stage furniture and properties I use the word in its literal sense with no intention of censure. The plays have often been overloaded with the trappings of the theatre. These productions go to the other extreme, and of the two I prefer the plain to the over-coloured, though I think the middle course better than either. *Hamlet* has usually been the play chosen for this purpose, and of several such experiments in the last ten years I choose that of Mr. Anmer Hall in 1937 as an example. The general arrangements were roughly those of the Elizabethan theatre, an inner stage, no scenery or lighting effects, little furniture, few supers, and the text spoken very nearly in full. What is more important, the acting was adequate though not thrilling. In brief, the experiment was worth making as one more of the many ways in which *Hamlet* can be presented on the stage. It was also, the programme told us, an attempt 'to give full expression to Professor

Dover Wilson's recent discoveries.' To discuss these is beyond my purpose. I can only say ditto to Mr. Granville Barker's comments in them in his *Preface* to the play.

Plain straightforward production of this kind is a better method of interpreting Shakespeare than fantasmagoria. But when the two are joined together as they were in some amateur performances at Cambridge in the twenties the result was a strange mixture. The stage was a bare platform, the only scenery or furniture a number of blocks of wood rearranged from time to time in different patterns, and there were no properties at all, even such necessities as letters or swords being left to the imagination. The purpose of all this was, obviously, not to create illusion. It was purely symbolical. For the same reason the costumes made no attempt at realism. In *As You Like It* Rosalind and Orlando were dressed all in white, Duke Frederick and Oliver all in black, and the rest in various combinations of black and white to symbolize what Charles Reade calls moral magpies. The acting was likewise symbolical. In the wrestling match Charles fell down without Orlando having even touched him, and when the Duke said, 'Take him away,' he got up again and walked off. For the last scene of *Romeo and Juliet* the wooden blocks were arranged to form three coffins. Juliet entered (there being no curtain she could not be 'discovered') and lay down in one of them, and after their deaths Paris and Romeo lay down in the others.

All this was not, like some eccentricities, intended merely to amuse or startle the spectator. There was a genuine idea in it, just as there was in Miss Lena Ashwell's presentation, in 1925, of *The Tempest*, as 'A Mystery in which is Shown A Pilgrimage of Mortals through Purgatory to Paradise.' Prospero symbolized the Deity, Miranda 'the Heavenly Bride,' Caliban the Devil (got up as a prehistoric lizard), and the others were mortals in various stages of the advance towards perfection. Both this and the Cambridge performances were, like much else that has been mentioned in this chapter, interesting as curiosities. Nevertheless there will be some satisfaction, to me at least, in getting back in the next chapter to the more conventional methods of interpreting Shakespeare, and in turning from fantastication to, literally, fresh air.

CHAPTER VIII

SHAKESPEARE IN THE OPEN AIR

A MATEURS had occasionally given open-air performances of Shakespeare, such as that of *The Tempest* which is the subject of one of the most amusing of Anstey's dialogues, but I fancy professionals rather fought shy of them until Ben Greet formed his company of 'Pastoral Players' in the eighties. In the next decade they used to visit Oxford in the summer term and it was there, in Worcester College Gardens, that I first saw them. Greet himself was a capable manager and a good, sound actor. A stolid, sententious Touchstone was about his best part. But neither as actor, trainer, or producer could he be compared with Benson.

For me the high light of these occasions was the Rosalind of Dorothea Baird. Though she had personal charm and good technique she was by no means a first-rate actress. In fact her heart was not really in the theatre but in the work of Infant Welfare to which she devoted all the later part of her life. In some parts I thought her not more than mediocre, but when she put on the doublet and hose of Rosalind she simply slipped into the skin of the character. After more than forty years

I could describe in detail how she spoke certain lines and did certain things, though I should find it difficult to explain how she made the spirit of Rosalind shine through the words and actions. She was neither the first nor the best actress I have seen in the part but she remains my ideal of it.

There was one flaw. When she came to 'And I for no woman' she turned and bawled the words at Phoebe. It is fair to add that this was formerly the accepted way of speaking them; even Miss Thorndike did it. For many years I longed to hear them spoken as if Rosalind had forgotten all about Phoebe and were thinking only of Orlando; just as I used to long to see the eavesdropping scenes in *Twelfth Night* and *Much Ado* played naturally without the ridiculous exaggerations of stage tradition. Now they are, as a rule, played as I would have them, and are much more amusing.

Other members of Ben Greet's Company were H. B. Irving, who seemed out of his element in comic parts but made a good Leontes; Mr. Leon Quartermaine, a capital Feste, light and dry; and I particularly remember the handsome presence and fine elocution of an actor who appeared on the bills as Bernard Gould, but has since been better known as Sir Bernard Partidge, the *Punch* cartoonist.

At other seasons the Company acted Shakespeare indoors. I recall a performance of *Macbeth* in which Mr. William Mollison was a vigorous Macbeth in the good old barn-storming style; and Miss Eleanor Calhoun was a pocket Lady

Macbeth, but a very good one. I have scarcely ever heard 'We fail' so splendidly declaimed. There was also one of the most absurd 'effects' I have ever seen. After their first dialogue with Macbeth the Witches stepped behind a rock and three scarecrows were hauled up at the back to represent them flying away.

I leap over thirty years to record that in 1928 Ben Greet gave me an opportunity of seeing *Hamlet* acted in the version of the First Quarto. With some few omissions the complete text was spoken even down to misprints like 'my chief' for 'mischief,' and I was surprised to find that in spite of the numerous variations the general effect was very much the same as one gets from the better and better-known version. I doubt whether any one who had seen that version acted but was not familiar with it in detail would have known that there was any difference.

After the nineties I saw no more open-air performances, with one trifling exception, until 1933 when Mr. Sydney Carroll started his gallant and most laudable venture in Regent's Park. His productions there are so recent, and fortunately so widely known, that there is no need to say much about them. But I may note one or two rather important differences between them and Ben Greet's.

In the first place they were not confined to pastoral plays in the strict sense of the term. The *Dream* and one or two others specially suited to open-air performance were Mr. Carroll's trump

cards, but he also gave us others, such as *Romeo* and the *Merry Wives*, in which there are a good many indoor scenes. It is interesting, by the way, to recall that the very plays which we think most appropriate to the open air, such as the *Dream* and *The Tempest*, were in fact written for indoor performance, whereas some of those that have a large proportion of indoor scenes were originally intended for the open-air theatre.

And Ben Greet not only had a much smaller repertory but his stage and auditorium were also much smaller, and, except that both were open to the sky, the general effect was not greatly different from that of the indoor theatre. The arrangements in Regent's Park were very different and enabled us to realize to some extent how the plays appeared to the Elizabethan spectators. The huge stage and auditorium obliged the actors to eschew delicate shades of playing and to go in for broad effects. Other likenesses to the Elizabethan theatre were that all entrances and exits had to be made in view of the spectators,¹ and that we frequently saw the actors and the action from what are to us unfamiliar angles. At matinees, when there was of course no artificial lighting, one came nearer still to Elizabethan conditions and saw the plays by daylight.

There was little stage furniture, and what there was must likewise be brought in and taken off

¹ So they were in Ben Greet's time. But with his small stage and the whole audience seated directly in front of it the contrast with the indoor theatre was less striking.

before our eyes. There was even some attempt at an inner stage; for example, the tent in *Julius Caesar* which localized the action though the actors did not remain within it. This, I imagine, was how the quarrel scene was originally played. In *Romeo* an erection at the back served the purpose of both the upper and inner stages of Shakespeare's time, and allowed us to see how the scenes of Juliet's bedroom and the tomb may then have been arranged.

On the other hand our hardier ancestors had no convenient covered theatre close by in which they could take refuge when, as at a performance of *The Tempest*, a real tempest drove us scurrying from our seats in the Fourth Act. Again, in Shakespeare's time, as in Ben Greet's, there were no amplifiers. In those simpler days the actors had to depend on their own voices. In Regent's Park these machines were, I suppose, necessary, but none the less objectionable. It was an odd experience to stand at the back of the auditorium and watch the little figures bobbing about far away on the brightly-lit stage while their voices came booming at one from quite a different direction.

Another device of Mr. Carroll's which I cannot commend was the flummery of introductory speeches and songs. It was pleasant to see once more the pioneer of open-air playing, now Sir Philip Ben Greet, even though he was also decorated with the foppish title of 'Master of the Greensward.' But his speeches before the plays were quite superfluous. On one occasion—and

it was not a first night—when the performance was announced for half-past eight the first words of the play were not spoken till five minutes past nine.

For all this there was in these performances, as Ben Jonson said of Shakespeare, 'ever more to be praised than to be pardoned.' On a warm summer evening the grassy stage with its background of trees made a perfect open-air setting. It also gave scope for some unusual bits of business, as in *Winter's Tale*, when we saw a very realistic bear rooting about in the real bushes as a preliminary to chasing Antigonus.

The Company, strengthened as it was by accessions from the Old Vic, maintained a high level. I was happy to see Mr. Atkins again and to find that he infused more jollity into his Sir Toby than when I saw it before, and that his Caliban was as good as ever, a truly imaginative performance. His gestures as he followed Ariel's music were wonderfully expressive, and his outburst of 'Freedom, freedom,' at the end of Act II far more in character than the clumsy stamping and dancing in which it is customary to indulge at this point.

As for Mr. Leslie French, the grave, statuesque beauty of his Ariel almost makes me waver in my faith that Miss Agnes Carter came as near to the true Ariel as a mortal can. When he said, 'Mine would, sir, were I human,' he really made you feel that a supernatural being was speaking. At the Old Vic his delivery of the harpy speech was one of the most lovely things I have ever heard. In

Regent's Park it was marred by a musical accompaniment and by the amplifiers.

I thought it a mistake to introduce into *The Tempest* the masque from Dryden and Davenant's mangled version of the play. But the part played by the fairies in the *Dream* was admirably conceived and carried out. They were allowed to take a larger share in the action than usual. And this was right, because in those surroundings dances and crowd effects count for more in proportion to individual performances than on the indoor stage.

Naturally Puck took a leading part in these scenes, and I liked to observe the different styles in which he was played. Mr. French skilfully differentiated him from Ariel. Miss Jean Forbes Robertson was the most goblinlike fairy ever seen on the stage, and the most amusingly mischievous was Miss Pamela Stanley, fresh from her triumphs as Queen Victoria.

Formerly the lovers in the *Dream* played in the key of comedy. Now their scenes are becoming much more farcical. But in the Regent's Park revivals the frequent interpositions of the fairies in these scenes remind us that they are under the influence of magic and so keeps their extravagances in harmony with the spirit of the play.

By an eccentric piece of casting Mr. French was once made to play Bottom and, as might be expected, he proved too light and mercurial for that stolid son of toil. Mr. Atkins was much better suited to the part, and rightly made him a middle-aged man, not a youth as some recent actors have

done. The best of the other clowns was Mr. Morland Graham as the mild and harassed Quince. His efforts to make his actors say 'Ninus,' and eventual despairing resignation when they would say 'Ninny's' were about the funniest things in these scenes.

Mr. French was better suited as Costard, a nimbler-witted clown than Bottom. In this revival of *Love's Labour's Lost* Mr. Wilfred Walter played the King in a quiet, almost sombre, style which was an effective foil to the charmingly light touch of Mr. John Wyse as Berowne. Mr. Holloway was a heavy, rather Pistol-like Armado with a foreign accent, a refinement of which there is no hint in the text. He was also the most ferocious Caliban I have seen, his acquired language sometimes comically degenerating into his native chattering. Mr. Ion Swinley was a dignified, human Prospero, and spoke the verse nobly as befitted an old Bensonian. And he put real imagination into his acting. As the disguised Kent he was not only the faithful follower. That is Kent's obvious job. Mr. Swinley showed that he was also the great noble assuming the character of a poor man and enjoying it. This was at the Vic, where he was also a better than average Hamlet, Othello, and Macbeth. In the last-named part his hand played the part attributed by Dickens to Macready's leg, of lingering for some time in view of the audience 'when accompanying him off the stage with reluctance to the assassination of Duncan.'

Another excellent revival at Regent's Park was that of *As You Like It* in which Mr. Jack Hawkins and Miss Phyllis Neilson-Terry made the mock marriage very affecting. At the climax both seemed to lose themselves for a moment before returning to earth. Mr. Basil Gill can always be relied on for sound, intelligent work. As the Banished Duke he was both dignified and natural, the real fallen nobleman. His whispered conversation with Orlando was very skilfully done. One could really follow what they were saying.

When Tree produced *Henry VIII* he included an elaborate Coronation Scene as a kind of magnificent topical allusion to the forthcoming coronation of George V. In reviving the play in 1936 Mr. Carroll may likewise have had an eye on the ceremony of the following year. Be this as it may, he used the wide expanse of his stage to excellent effect for the Queen's Trial and Wolsey's evening party as well as for the Coronation itself, in which, as in Tree's revival, we had Henry looking on unseen. This reminds me that the part was well played by Mr. Lyn Harding, a survivor of Tree's Company. But I thought that, considering the size of the stage, the street fight in *Romeo* might have been made more effective. The best thing in it was two pages of the rival households pummelling each other vigorously with their fists.

To return to *Henry VIII*, Miss Neilson-Terry justified what Dr. Johnson says of the part of Katharine by giving the best performance of the evening, beautiful, dignified, and weighty. There

is no consistency in the character of Wolsey. At one time he is arrogant, crafty, and malevolent, at another resigned and pious. Mr. Holloway gave both aspects sufficiently well, but made no attempt to reproduce Wolsey's personal appearance. When Lyall Swete played the part with Miss Thorndike his likeness to a well-known portrait was startling. Mr. Holloway made him a grim, ascetic figure oddly recalling the portraits of Cardinal Manning.

The pleasure of thinking over my recollections of these enjoyable performances has led me to write of them in more detail than I intended. And they are not Mr. Carroll's only claim to the gratitude of lovers of Shakespeare. He has also given us two notable revivals on the indoor stage which may come in here though they are not strictly germane to the subject of this chapter.

His *Twelfth Night* in 1932 was beautifully arranged in a setting of black and white scenery and costumes. It also gave me the happiness of seeing the Sir Andrew of Norman Forbes for the fifth and last time, and of finding it as delightful as ever. His niece, Miss Jean Forbes Robertson, is not quite my ideal Viola, a creature compounded of my imagination and my recollection of Ada Rehan, but she gave a lovely interpretation of the pathetic side of the character. Mr. Laurie, like Frank Rodney, let us see that Feste was a human being as well as a professional funny man, and that he thoroughly enjoys his own fooling. Here I may interpolate that when he played the part at

the Vic the play opened with his singing 'Come away, death' to give the cue for Orsino's first speech, 'If music be the food of love.' An admirable idea if Shakespeare had happened to think of it. At any rate it was harmless in comparison with Mr. Carroll's innovation at the other end of the play by which Olivia—of all people—sang the final song as a duet with Feste. This seems incredible, but, as Juliet's Nurse says, I saw it with mine eyes.

While I yield to no one in love and admiration for Charles Lamb I have never for a moment accepted his argument that Shakespeare's plays are not suited to the stage. It is in fact no more than a bit of rather perverse special pleading due to irritation at a foolish inscription which put Garrick on a level with Shakespeare. The plays were written to be acted and I am prepared to maintain that it is only when they are acted that we appreciate them to the full. And to my mind a really good performance of *Twelfth Night* is the perfection of pleasure that Shakespearean acting can give, at any rate in comedy. Yet even while I watched this performance—and it was a really good one—little imperfections would keep interfering to mar the full enjoyment of it. The beauty of the verse marred by some slip; a jarring bit of business intruded; a joke misunderstood and therefore spoilt. I suppose the fact is that in reading one unconsciously misses something of the life with which good acting can endow the words. But the

loss is negative; whereas in the theatre the little faults are only pinpricks but they are positive.

In 1935 Mr. Carroll made the daring experiment of engaging Mr. George Robey to play Falstaff in 1 *Henry IV*. Opinions were divided, but my own verdict, after seeing the revival twice, was on the whole favourable. Even on the second occasion when it had been running for some weeks Mr. Robey still substituted some of his own words for Shakespeare's, and he was more sprightly and less deliberate than Falstaff should be. But he did not modernize or vulgarize the character. On the contrary, he showed that he understood the real humour of it. His reiterated 'a plague of all cowards,' for instance, was exactly right.

After directing the Regent's Park revivals for six years Mr. Carroll gave way to Mr. Robert Atkins, who had already assisted in producing some of the plays. I had seen his production of *Pericles* at the Old Vic nearly twenty years before and he now revived it, thus enabling me to reduce to three the plays which I have seen only once. (I must apologize for the personal note, but this book is a record of my personal experiences.) Happily Mr. Atkins realized that we went to see the plays, and did away with the introductory speeches and songs. But in *Pericles* he went the whole hog in the way of ballets, which were not inappropriate in an open-air performance of this disjointed medley of a play. We had an opening ballet of the worship of Diana, a ballet of *Pericles'* subjects trying (unsuccessfully) to cheer him up

after his misadventure at Antioch, a ballet of starving people at Tarsus, a ballet of knights at Simonides' court, and a ballet representing a storm at sea.

In the 'prose scenes of the Fourth Act,' to borrow Swinburne's elegant periphrasis, much was made of the other inmates of the brothel in contrast to Marina's purity. But Miss Margaret Vines looked and played the part well enough not to need this meretricious aid. The scene between Simonides, Pericles, and Thaisa (II. iv) was amusingly perverted into a parody of the relations between Prospero, Ferdinand, and Miranda, a bit of cheerful fooling that went down well. In Act I I imagine the author intended the former suitors to be displayed as corpses for a warning to Pericles and a thrill for the groundlings. Here they were seen being led to execution, which perhaps accords better with modern tastes.

And so I come to the last of all these revivals. *Twelfth Night* requires more delicate handling than it can receive on a large open-air stage, but with this proviso the acting was on a high level. Many Violas try for a laugh by shouting 'If God did all.' I was the more pleased that Miss Jessica Tandy spoke it quietly, and there was no laughter. Mr. French was a charming Feste and sang beautifully, and I liked the Sir Toby of Mr. Morris Harvey whom I used to see many years ago as one of Pelissier's Follies.

In one scene Antonio came in smoking a pipe. I note this trifling point because, apart from per-

formances in modern dress, it is only the second time in fifty years that I have seen smoking on the Shakespearean stage. The other was also in *Twelfth Night*, when in Daly's production the knights smoked pipes in the kitchen scene.

I saw this revival at the very end of August, 1939. Two nights later the black-out put an end for the time to open-air performances, and to many other things.

CHAPTER IX

THE PAST AND THE FUTURE

HERE were the end, had anything an end,' as Browning says. But the acting of Shakespeare goes on and will go on. Already between August, 1939, and the writing of these words I have seen five more performances of his plays and so have fully completed the fifty years of Shakespearean playgoing which began in January, 1890. It is not my purpose to carry the story further, but before I end there are some gaps to be filled in.

I said just now that the acting of Shakespeare will go on. One of those who will maintain its best traditions is a scion of the great house of Terry. I have spoken already of Mr. John Gielgud's early work at the Old Vic. Since then he has advanced further towards his rightful place in the theatre of to-day by giving us revivals of his own. His Hamlet is as much the best of my later as Forbes Robertson's was of my earlier time. Both excelled in the beauty and charm they threw over the character. Except where Hamlet must necessarily rant Mr. Gielgud is quiet and thoughtful. This made the nunnery scene more effective than it is when Hamlet storms through it. It was right, too,

that he did not see the spies. His suspicions were roused by Ophelia's looking at the arras. In the Old Vic revival at the climax of the play scene he leaned over the back of the King's chair and spoke in a conversational tone. I was sorry that in his own production he deserted this novel and striking effect for the traditional business. But all through the play he really did hold a mirror up to nature and brought a new or forgotten meaning out of familiar things. Nothing could have been better than his delivery of 'To be or not to be,' spoken as if he really were thinking the thing out.

It was inevitable that an actor of Mr. Gielgud's eminence should produce the *Merchant*. Mr. Agate never misses an opportunity of girding at this play, but it is excellent 'theatre,' and every ambitious actor and actress wants to have a go at Shylock and Portia. In my own records it comes next after *Hamlet* in the number of performances I have seen. All the same, Shylock is not quite Mr. Gielgud's part. The quiet beauty and imagination that distinguish his acting prevented him from getting the best out of it.

But he was certainly the best of the more than twenty Romeos I have seen, in passing from the moody youth, through the happy, eager lover, to the fully developed man of the later Acts. His Mercutio was less successful, and the play went better when he took Romeo himself and resigned Mercutio to Mr. Laurence Olivier who was more robust and roistering.

In fact Mr. Gielgud was fortunate in his Com-

pany, or perhaps I should say skilful in selecting it. Miss Evans picked herself, as they say, for the Nurse. Miss Peggy Ashcroft was a charming Juliet, and so was Miss Frangcon-Davies who played the part with Mr. Gielgud in an earlier production, and played it with an exquisite simplicity covering but not concealing rare depths of passion.

Mr. Vosper was the King in the modern-dress *Hamlet* and also in Mr. Gielgud's revival, and it was pleasant to see how he varied his style to suit the two different productions, the realistic and the romantic. The gem of the performance, after Hamlet himself, was Mr. George Howe, the best Polonius I have seen since Lyall Swete. He was life-like and yet richly comic without buffoonery. This was the best thing Mr. Howe has done, but now that I have mentioned this capital comedian I must spare a few lines for some of his earlier work. The first time he attracted my attention he was a quietly intelligent Puck in Mr. Donald Calthrop's revival of the *Dream* in 1923, in which, by the way, all the forest scenes were played in semi-darkness. This deprived the actors of some of their opportunities but it produced a really dreamlike effect which was charming in its way. At the Vic Mr. Howe's Trinculo was a clever study of a weak-minded youth mazed and bewildered by his strange surrounding. His best moment as Sir Andrew was when he was melted to tears by the song 'O Mistress Mine.'

I cannot leave Mr. Gielgud's revivals without a

word of praise for the stage settings, especially that of *Romeo*. There was one main scene which was ingeniously varied to represent different places, and the difficulty on the modern stage of making Juliet's bedroom an upper scene, as the text requires, was skilfully overcome; the lower level being at one time Capulet's Orchard, at another a room in his house. The ball scene with its gaily-dressed assembly was greeted with applause each time I saw the revival. As I have remarked before, this is a compliment which is seldom paid to mere stage mounting nowadays, though it often was in former times.

Too many actors to-day resemble those of whom W. B. Yeats wrote—

They say it is more human
To shuffle, grunt and groan.

I have heard a Laertes speak the words, 'Oh rose of May,' without giving the slightest hint that he found any beauty or poetry in them. Worse still, I have known a Juliet, at one of the most poignant moments in the play, remark 'Is there no pity sitting in the clouds?' in the most matter-of-fact tones, as if she were asking 'Is there no mustard on the table?' And this was an actress whom I have heard others praise, and that highly. When I think of some modern performers I am tempted to quote more of Hamlet's advice. But there is consolation in the remembrance that others, like Mr. Gielgud and his colleagues, act with imagination as well as with intelligence, and

speak Shakespeare's lines as they should be spoken. It is acting and elocution like this that will keep his plays alive upon the stage and make people want to see them for their own sake, while modern dress and stylized scenery stir no more than a passing curiosity.

In recent years the Old Vic has no longer been the home of Shakespeare. It has become a lodging-house in which he occupies one of the smaller rooms. It is significant that when the war sent the Company on tour in the autumn of 1939 their programme consisted of two plays by Mr. Shaw, one by Goldsmith, and one by Shakespeare. I forbear to think of what Miss Baylis would have said—and done. Nevertheless, there have been some good performances of Shakespeare at the Vic in recent years on more normal lines than those reviewed in Chapter VII. I have spoken already of Mr. Olivier, but I must return to him for the pleasure of recalling his *Coriolanus*, a well-balanced performance, more flexible in voice and style than his *Macbeth*. While I rejoiced at Miss Thorndike's return to the Vic, even for a single revival, I thought her *Volumnia* too much the modern soldier's mother, proud, cheerful, and affectionate, but without grandeur until the scene with the Tribunes. They, by the way, were too much alike in their lean malignity. In the Irving and Benson revivals they were effectively distinguished.

From my experience it seems that in *Othello* one of the two chief characters must dominate the

play and reduce the other almost to insignificance. Forbes Robertson, Asche, and Mr. Walter carried off the play as Othello. The brothers Irving ran away with it as Iago, and so did Mr. Olivier. He started in a jaunty, humorous vein, and clowned the 'put money' speech to such an extent that many of the audience decided that he was a comic character and thenceforward were prepared to laugh at anything he said. I have never seen a part so over-acted, and though this is better than under-acting, especially in Shakespeare, I cannot reckon Iago among his successes.

His Hamlet, on the other hand, was the best thing I have yet seen him do. He gave the emotional and hysterical scenes their full effect, and his clear, swift delivery made even the less interesting passages, such as the 'eyases,' a pleasure to hear. I had already noted Miss Cherry Cottrell as a promising actress when she played Nerissa with exactly the right amount of demure humour. She also infused some humour into Ophelia which few actresses do. Her resignation to a paternal lecture when Polonius began the advice to Laertes, as if she were thinking 'Father's off again,' was legitimate and not overdone. And I liked her pretty dignity under Hamlet's reproaches in the nunnery scene.

In this revival the full text was spoken with one omission of about twelve lines, possibly by inadvertence. It may be worth while to note that, excluding intervals, it occupied three hours and three quarters, whereas in the Benson revival it

took just five hours. This is striking testimony to the way in which good modern actors speak Shakespeare's lines. Without retracting anything I have said in praise of the old actors or in criticism of some of their successors, I regard this as the greatest improvement that the theatre has known in my time.

In the following year, 1938, I again saw the complete *Hamlet* at the Vic. This time it was given in modern dress and therefore might have been included in Chapter VII. But the modern setting was so unobtrusive that one scarcely noticed it, which is as it should be, whereas in the revivals there described one was hardly allowed to notice anything else. The rain at Ophelia's funeral, with umbrellas held over the mourners, was not inappropriate as a piece of symbolism, though the producer, Mr. Tyrone Guthrie, may not have been consciously thinking of 'Too much of water hast thou, poor Ophelia.'

Mr. Alec Guinness was a Hamlet of youthful charm, dreamy and sad, and very gentle with Ophelia. His sorrowful shake of the head with a half-smile when she says 'At home, my lord' fitted in well with his conception of the character. Nor did he storm too much at the Queen. Best of all, perhaps, was his skilful mingling of real and feigned madness. But like nearly all Hamlets he was much too slow at the climax of the duel.

No character gains more by the full text than Polonius, and that fine old Bensonian, Mr. O. B. Clarence, took full advantage of the fact. A genial

old politician, fussily tactful and not by any means a fool, he was at once natural and amusing. Miss Hermione Hannen's Ophelia was simple and sweet but also rather stupid and without the sense of humour I observed in Miss Cottrell. Both interpretations are legitimate, but I think the stupid accords better with the text.

Among others to whom I have already paid my respects in passing are Mr. Cecil Trouncer and Mr. Alec Clunes, a capital Autolycus, light-hearted as well as light-fingered. Autolycus ought to let us see that he enjoys his own roguery. I must spare a sentence for Mr. Abraham Sofaer who, among other good performances, once achieved the remarkable feat of making the King the most important character in *Hamlet*, completely outplaying Hamlet himself. In a recent production of *Julius Caesar* the quarrel scene of Mr. Leo Genn and Mr. William Devlin was the best I have seen since Waller and McLeay played it in Tree's production. One saw how the excitable sincerity of Mr. Devlin's Cassius stood no chance against the calm, irritating superiority with which Mr. Genn as Brutus masked a deeper emotion. Mr. Devlin's strong voice and style made him one of the best Lears of recent times, though the first time I saw him in the part he or the producer introduced a very inappropriate bit of realism when the cue for the pathetic 'If you have poison for me' was given by the physician handing Lear a drink of medicine. One of the best things in this performance (it was at the Westminster Theatre in 1934) was the Oswald

of Mr. Julian Somers; sly and obsequious, a kind of Shakespearean Uriah Heep. It was new to me that he should feel or affect love for Goneril, giving her bold, amorous looks, and 'registering' jealousy when she kisses Edmund.

In the players of the younger generation whom I have mentioned in this chapter I see, as Bolingbroke says, some sparks of better, indeed of very good, hope for the future of Shakespeare on the stage. And now, finally, for a few performances of former years which did not fit into my earlier chapters.

One of the most enjoyable of all my memories is that of *As You Like It* produced by Mr. (later Sir) Nigel Playfair at the Lyric, Hammersmith, in 1923. His son has told us that it 'attracted only the connoisseurs,' which is another proof, if proof were needed, that since the Great War there has not been the same cultured public who can appreciate good Shakespearean acting that there was formerly. The setting was eccentric only in the sense that it was not conventional. The scenery was simple, neither stylized nor realistic, and together with the dresses made a rich feast of colour. There was no formalism and no striving after oddity. It was all jolly and delightful, and rather free and easy.

Best of all was the acting of the two chief parts. Among some twenty Rosalinds that I have seen Miss Athene Seyler comes next to Dorothea Baird in charm. (And a Rosalind who does not charm may as well go home.) In the forest scenes she

looked like a boy, not a principal boy ; and showed the underlying excitement in her adventure that a high-bred girl would naturally feel. Her secretly kissing her own hand when Orlando says 'By the white hand of Rosalind' was an exquisite touch. And so was the shudder with which Mr. Herbert Marshall finished off the Seven Ages. His humour was dry and rather hard, as I think Jaques should be.

A very rapturous occasion was the Clan Matinee of *Twelfth Night* in 1927 ; so called because several of the major and, I think, all the minor parts were taken by members of the Forbes Robertson family. For the first time in the history of the play the Priest, who has only eight lines to speak, received more enthusiastic applause than any other character. This was because we were so delighted to see and hear Sir Johnston Forbes Robertson again, fourteen years after he had formally retired from the stage. I have already praised the excellent Viola of his daughter, Miss Jean Forbes Robertson, and the super-excellent Sir Andrew of his brother, Norman Forbes. And Miss Gertrude Elliott (Lady Forbes Robertson) thoroughly understood the humour of Maria, and conveyed it in a quiet, natural way without exaggeration.

Another production with an all-star cast was the *Dream* at Drury Lane in 1925. Leon Quartermaine, Frank Vosper, Wilfred Walter, Edith Evans, Gwen Frangcon-Davies, Athene Seyler, are only a few of the names on the programme. Yet

they did not overweight the delicate comedy but made it go lightly and merrily on Christmas holiday lines. Mr. Hay Petrie as a faun-like Puck was a favourite with the children who were a large proportion of the audience, but his little niggling laugh was a mistake. Theseus may live in a Mycenaean Palace, as he did on this occasion, but Puck is an English sprite in an English wood, and his laugh should be a deep-chested Ho, ho, ho! Among a capital set of clowns I specially liked Mr. Miles Malleeson's Snout, a genuine working-man trying to act, not a professional actor trying to be funny. And he had a splendid village-idiot grin.

Mr. Malleeson was also one of the successes of Mr. J. B. Fagan's Shakespearean revivals at the Court Theatre. As Lancelot in the *Merchant* he even made the rather threadbare jokes of his scene with Old Gobbo amusing. But the great attraction was the Shylock of a Russian actor, Mr. Maurice Moscovitch. Like Mr. Poel before him and Mr. Petrie and others since, he entirely threw over the tradition of making Shylock a great tragic figure. But whereas Mr. Poel was grotesque Mr. Moscovitch was grimly realistic. In his first scene he had the right natural manner with the Christians, the shrugs, the deprecating smile, the obsequious jocularly. At the end of this scene instead of scowling or spitting after Antonio he took his handkerchief and twisted it round and round. This was natural and not stagy, and the

intensity of passion which he put into the action was amazing.

It was characteristic that he carried no staff. A Shylock of the Edmund Kean and Irving school would be lost without his staff, but Mr. Moscovitch did not need it because he was a Shylock entirely without dignity. His taking off his rings and turning up his sleeves, when he was preparing to cut the pound of flesh, was a piece of realism entirely in keeping with his conception, and his collapse at the catastrophe of the Trial was as undignified as anything could be.

Mr. Arthur Phillips is a Shylock in the Irving tradition. He formerly had the honour of playing the Trial Scene with Ellen Terry, and in his own season at the Lyric, Hammersmith (1935-36), he acted this, Macbeth, and other leading parts in a robust, oratorical style that was not unacceptable. But he gave me a shock in the *Merchant* when the curtain rose on a room in Antonio's house with his friends paying morning calls. There was more embroidery when part of Act II was played in Shylock's house in order that we might see him gloating over Antonio's bond and locking it up in his cashbox. Often as I had seen the play I had never been inside either of those houses before.

Having referred to this season I cannot omit Mr. Basil Gill's Macduff, one of the very best I have seen. As I have said before, the climax of IV.iii is one of the tests of an actor who is not afraid of his part and Mr. Gill passed it with all the honours. In V. iv a point new to me, and a very

good one, was his fretting impatience to get on with the war and not so much talk about it.

I have seen Mr. Gill as Brutus in four different revivals. He is always grave and distinguished, and the last time, in Sir Oswald Stoll's Shakespearean season of 1934, he fairly dominated the play. But in the scene after the murder the business of the other conspirators rushing furiously at Antony and having to be pulled off by Brutus was repeated so often as to become ludicrous.

During this season *Henry V* was mounted very much in the old style, which, as I have said, I do not object to now and then as a change from the simpler modern methods. But it was strange that during the Crispin speech, in which Waller made such a grand effect,¹ none of Henry's army, with one exception, showed the slightest interest in what their leader was saying.

The exception was Mr. Petrie, one of the best Fluellens I have seen. He was not too perky as some actors are in the part, but made his choleric joviality really natural as well as very funny. Even such a trifle as his springing to attention when the king addresses him was cleverly and amusingly done. I do not (I could not) forget Frank Rodney when I say that Mr. Gill was as good an Exeter as I have seen. The part is a long and important one with hardly any 'fat,' and Mr. Gill, like Rodney, gave it real character. I thoroughly enjoyed watching him whenever he was on the stage.

In Sir Oswald Stoll's revival of the *Merchant*

¹ Above, p. 53.

Mr. Gill was an excellent Antonio, and by a strange innovation at the end of the play he was left alone musing happily over the safety of his ships. Another novelty was that Lancelot was made to deliver his first speech to a group of laughing supers. I suppose the producer could not stomach the thought of his addressing the audience directly in the manner of an Elizabethan clown. Yet this has often been done in the modern theatre without disastrous results. As in Tree's revival Tubal was brought on to support Shylock in his first scene. This weakens the effect of the scene, but it gave us one exquisitely comic moment in Tubal's dismay when Shylock says that he will advance the money. Finally I must express my thanks to Sir Oswald Stoll for allowing us to see, in Miss Marie Ney, one of the best Portias of recent times. She was the great lady Portia should be, dignified and stately yet with the right melting charm.

And now it is time to make an end. As this book does not profess to be a history of the Shakespearean stage for the period it covers, so neither is it a complete record of the performances I have seen. There are many, and some of them not the least praiseworthy, that I have not even mentioned. My purpose, as I said at the beginning, has been to sketch the changes that have taken place in Shakespearean acting and production during half a century and to illustrate them from my own recollections. Any reader who has persevered so far will be in no doubt which

of these changes I consider are for the better and which for the worse. I have not been backward in expressing my pleasure at some of the improvements in the manner of producing the plays, nor have I concealed my belief that much of the acting I saw in my younger years reached a higher level of artistic achievement than almost any that I have seen since. And since this book is based throughout on my impressions written down at the time I do not think that memory has painted those early performances in brighter colours than they actually wore. Indeed I have sometimes toned down my earlier impressions in the light of fuller experience and more mature judgement. And as I have tried to praise without excess so I hope that where I have censured I have done so without undue acerbity. Of one thing I am sure. If any one finds half as much enjoyment in reading as I have found in writing this book he will have no cause to regret the time that either of us has spent on it.

9512

